

THE HEALING PROCESS IN TWO RELIGIOUS WORLDS¹

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Introduction

Human hands have many senses, according to various knowledge systems such as anatomy, physiology, anthropology, and philosophy, but also magic, technology, and religion. Moreover, accompanying the history of societies, manual gestures have always had an important role, both in daily and religious life.

Among the countless religious meanings transmitted through manual gestures, the healing gesture, because of its wide presence in many cultures, allows for comparative study among different forms of religious expression. Through the healing gesture it is possible to grasp ideas related to the body that help explain health and illness, good and evil, disease and cure, life and death, pleasure and pain. In Brazil, Kardecist Spiritism and the Japanese religion of the Universal Messianic Church are relevant examples of the use of hands in religious healing. As a result, this study inquires into a conception of the body that exists during the religious healing that takes place through the hands, with the laying-on of hands (or *passé*), and with the *Johrei* Messianic technique.

Research on human gestures is rare. Mauss' study on physical techniques is very broad and allows for an understanding of the healing gesture as a physical healing technique, in addition to other techniques mentioned by him.² Using his or her hands, the healer expresses a "belief not only in the physical effectiveness, but also the moral, magical and ritualistic aspects of certain acts."³ In this sense, "the technical act, physical act, and the magical-religious act are blended by the healer."⁴ Therefore, the

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²Marcel Mauss, "Técnicas corporais," in *Sociologia e Antropologia*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: EPU/EDUSP, [1934] 1974), pp. 209-233.

³Ibid., p. 216.

⁴Ibid., p. 217.

healing gesture shares, with other physical techniques, the attribute of being a physio-psycho-sociological phenomenon.

As Rodrigues explains, “Illnesses, along with their causes, healing practices, and diagnoses are integral parts of a social universe and are, therefore, inseparable parts of our magical, cosmological and religious conceptions.”⁵ In this sense, like medicine, the religious healing itself holds the concept of the illness, the healing process, the power of the healer, and the most appropriate procedures for expressing the overall conception of the human body. Moreover, these conceptions express cultural contents and social ties through their own language.

Regarding the forms of religious expression chosen for this study, the use of hands is a central healing practice for the relief of physical and mental illnesses. However, they have their own historical path, both in the context of their origins and in Brazilian society. Their doctrines, theodicies, rituals, and cosmologies grant specific attributes to the hands, which should be considered in the description of their healing powers. They also translate Brazilian cultural content, shared collectively, and the way each of them confronts the consequences of modernization.⁶

Kardecist Spiritism arrived in Brazil around 1860 through a group of French immigrants interested in the Spiritist theme and it soon spread among Brazilians. However, non-Kardecist Spiritist practices were already known among Brazilians through Mesmerism and homeopathy.⁷ It should be emphasized that these schools of thought were previously focused on healing practices and were, at that time, integral parts of medicine. Consequently, when Kardec’s doctrine arrived in Brazil, the soil was fertile for receiving it and also for determining the predominant nature that this

⁵José Carlos Rodrigues, *Tabu do corpo* (Rio de Janeiro: Achiamé, 1980), p. 90.

⁶The collection of data for this study was done in 2004 and 2005, in Rio Claro, São Paulo, Brazil. This city has thirteen Spiritist Centers, one Universal Messianic Church headquarter and three *Johrei* Centers. The methods used to collect the data were a systematic observation of the healing practices studied and interviews with followers.

⁷Eduardo Araia, *Espiritismo: doutrina de fé e ciência* (São Paulo: Ática, 1996).

religion would assume among us: therapeutic means, for which the laying-on of hands is the primary form of expression.⁸

The Universal Messianic Church has had a different path in our country, one connected to Japanese immigration. Like other religious movements, it has served the Japanese community and its descendants as a religion of preservation of their ethnic and cultural assets.⁹ However, in the early 1960s, many of these religious movements started reaching out to the rest of the Brazilian population, achieving relative success. This was the case with some of the so-called Japanese “new-sects” such as, Seicho-no-ie, Perfect Liberty, and the Messianic Church, which integrated the new religious movements among the Brazilian people and according to Camargo’s classification, transformed them into universal religions, open to the conversion of everybody.¹⁰

All of these religions show considerably strong therapeutic functions. However, only the Messianic Church uses “healing through hands” (*johrei*).¹¹ Also, over the past few years, this practice has earned its own place: *Johrei* Centers have spread to various neighborhoods in cities where the Messianic have established themselves. This has reinforced their therapeutic vocation.

Sociology of religion and sociological and anthropological studies regarding the body provide the theoretical framework for this study. Along

⁸Cândido P. F. de Camargo et al., *Kardecismo e Umbanda* (São Paulo: Pioneira, 1961).

⁹ Idem et al., *Católicos, protestantes, espíritas* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1973).

¹⁰Takashi Maeyama, *O imigrante e a religião* (M.A. diss., São Paulo: Escola de Sociologia e Política, 1967); Hiranclair. R. Gonçalves, *Perfect Liberty: o fascínio de uma religião japonesa no Brasil* (M.A. diss., São Paulo: Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 1998); Idem, *O fascínio do Johrei: um estudo sobre a religião messiânica no Brasil* (Ph.D. diss., São Paulo: Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2003); and Leila Marrach B. de Albuquerque, *Seicho-no-ie do Brasil: agradecimento, obediência e salvação* (São Paulo: Annablume; FAPESP, 1999); and Camargo et al., *Católicos, protestantes, espíritas*.

¹¹Mokichi Okada was a member of Ōmoto kyō, which also has a practice of laying-on of hands. Other Japanese religious movements, like Mahikari, whose founder was member of Universal Messianic Church, use the practice of laying-on of hands.

with this, we also give some attention to the Western world's process of scientization and the arrival of post-modernity, as well as the status of religions in Brazil today viewed as components of the larger historical context where the healing gesture is found.

Bodies and Gestures

It is only recently that the social sciences have started looking at the human body as a collectively built corporeity. Although Hertz and Mauss directed their attention in the first half of the twentieth century to the cultural dimensions of the body, their efforts have not resulted in their own tradition of studies.¹² In other words, a sociological or anthropological perspective of the body has not become naturalized as it has been for religion, economy, knowledge, and so many other fields of social science.

Therefore, bodies became corporeity only with the social movements of the 1960s which affected many sectors of Western culture and behavior. Such movements favored the emergence of an appropriate context for studies that, as Rodrigues teaches, "...made evident the gigantic difference between the human and the merely animal body."¹³ In this process, those pioneering studies were invaluable for illuminating the historical, sociological, and anthropological dimensions of corporeity.

Perhaps the best study comes from Mauss, who dared to debate the biological and psychological dimensions of the corporeal techniques, attempting to tear down the barriers traditionally built between these domains and the social sciences.¹⁴ The theoretical effort of Mauss emphasizes the importance of education and the imitation of the constitution of corporeities, of *habitus*, and its variations among societies.

¹²Robert Hertz, "A preeminência da mão direita: um estudo sobre a polaridade religiosa," *Religião e Sociedade* 6 ([1909] 1980), pp. 99-128; and Marcel Mauss, "Técnicas corporais," *Sociologia e Antropologia*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: EPU/EDUSP [1934] 1974).

¹³José Carlos Rodrigues, "Os corpos na Antropologia," in Maria Cecília de S. Minayo and Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr., org, *Críticas e atuantes: Ciências Sociais e Humanas em Saúde na América Latina* (Rio de Janeiro: FIOCRUZ, 2005), p. 159.

¹⁴Marcel Mauss, "Técnicas corporais," *Sociologia e Antropologia*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: EPU/EDUSP [1934] 1974).

The thesis on the collective and spiritual superimposition over the organic and individual is already present in Durkheim's study on suicide.¹⁵ This author identifies social and historical reasons for such an intimate act with obvious consequences to the body. Following in the French School tradition, Rodrigues states that it is less in the separations and more in the encounters between the biological and the social, in the interpenetrations between the individual and the collective, and in the correspondence between animal and human, present in all collective effervescences, that the human body materializes itself.¹⁶ Paraphrasing Rodrigues, it is within these circumstances that culture reverberates within the flesh.¹⁷

These circumstances are also what make possible the symbolic efficacy of the various healing systems. That is, individual experiences earn meaning because they all participate in the narrative of a coherent system which explains not only the universe, but health and illness as well. This is valid equally from the most scientific of medicines to the most alternative of therapies.

Culture reverberates within the flesh, as well as within our mystical states. These states are reached through corporeal techniques. They are a "biological means of entering into *communication with God*," says Mauss.¹⁸ I have identified three large groups as gateways to alternate states of consciousness typical of mystical experiences: techniques centered on *breathing*, on *movements*, and on *food*. Individually or combined, these groups give us the yogas, meditations, pilgrimages, dances, fasts, various diets, and the ingestion of herbs. Accompanying these techniques, our *senses* contribute with the emission of sounds, the inhalation of aromas, and the control of vision. All of this demonstrates how we are, in fact, biochemical and symbolic at the same time.

Like this, facts taken as inexplicable by isolated sciences, like death by witchcraft or healing by faith, can be understood in these hybrid terrains, *impure*, in that they disobey the Cartesian separations such as,

¹⁵Emile Durkheim, *O suicídio* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, [1897] 2000).

¹⁶José Carlos Rodrigues, "Os corpos na Antropologia," in Maria Cecília de S. Minayo and Carlos E. A. Coimbra Jr., orgs., *Críticas e atuantes: Ciências Sociais e Humanas em Saúde na América Latina* (Rio de Janeiro: FIOCRUZ, 2005), pp. 157-182.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 180.

¹⁸Mauss, *Técnicas corporais*, p. 233.

body and mind, science and belief, man and nature, individual and society, spirit and matter. That is to say, these facts are contrary to the ideological substrata of the civilized model of modernity.

In summary, *sickness, health, illness, and cure* have their own religious explanations and, such as, they are culturally determined. In this way, they allow for an infinite range of definitions, beyond the debate regarding whether the practices involved are “scientific or unscientific.”

The use of hands during religious healing is part of a group of signs that has been considered natural, but that is, in truth, anchored in a theodicy. Like the corporeal contacts (the postures, aromas, physical appearance, facial expressions, the movement of body parts, and the focus of the eye), the position of the hands expresses a socially shared language.¹⁹ Through the hands, the priest blesses his followers at the end of the mass. Asking for the blessing of a father, older relative, or godfather involves gestures with the hands, followed by wishes for good health.

Hertz’s study, *The pre-eminence of the right hand: a study of religious polarity*, based on a plentiful array of ethnographic material, discusses the polarity between the right and left hand.²⁰ The author argues that the opposition between the right and left hand carries cultural meanings which contrast them, such as: good and bad character, intellectual retention and mistake, good and bad luck, the sacred and the profane. Based on examples within a religious context, Hertz denaturalizes the opposition between hands and confers to them the characteristics of social institution.

Ramm-Bonvitt, in his study on the *mudras*, presents a wide inventory of the use of hands among various Indian cultural expressions such as dance, iconography, and yoga.²¹ He highlights the importance of hand gestures in their healing system. Creating a comparison with Western cultures, he assesses the devaluation of hand gestures within Christianity:

The scorn shown regarding the language of gestures in the West can be understood starting with its history and the feelings of the

¹⁹José Carlos Rodrigues, *Tabu do Corpo* (Rio de Janeiro, Achiamé, 1980), p. 99.

²⁰Robert Hertz, “A preeminência da mão direita: um estudo sobre a polaridade religiosa,” *Religião e Sociedade* 6 (1909; 1980): 99-128.

²¹Ingrid Ramm-Bonwitt, *Mudras: As mãos como símbolo do Cosmo* (São Paulo: Pensamento, 1987).

Western world devotees. The Western Christian has always considered the body as an adversary, an obstacle on the path to salvation.²²

However, through traditions distant from Christianity, or even by their re-readings, as in the case of Kardecist Spiritism, the healing gesture remains in the West and occupies the obscure left by both Christian and scientific rationality.

Science and Religion

The consensus of modernity, as we know, produced a new approach with regard to interpreting human experiences by trying to eliminate the sacred dimension from its narratives. Since the sixteenth century, the advance of science and the profane with regard to traditions, common sense, and religion has brought to the West a process of rationalization that is marked by a significant change in our conception of the world, humanity, and earth. We have, therefore, the decline of the feeling of integration of mankind in relation to nature and the cosmos on both the physical and psychic levels. This is the disenchantment of the world.

Furthermore, this process expelled from reality its incalculable dimensions, planted the foundation of scientific knowledge, and has been the basis of a duel between science and religion which has lasted four-hundred years.

In this process, health and the treatment of illness were re-defined in the sphere of scientific knowledge based on the canons of materialism which are supported by their own empirical evidence. Obviously, religious healings were not immune to this movement, and, moreover, it was expected that rational thinking would completely replace these enchanted religious rituals regarding the mind and body. It can be said, however, that in this crusade, the religious procedures did not disappear, but that they hid themselves. Niches such as oral traditions, rites of passage, traditional religiosity, and the ceremonies and cultural legacy of minorities gave refuge to a wide range of pre-modern knowledge which, in spite of everything, became fragmented.

²²Ibid., p. 266.

The increasing scientization of life has obviously brought positive results, such as technological advances, control over the forces of nature, longevity, and well-being for those that have the resources to reap their benefits. However, science has shown itself incapable of dealing with the mystical and metaphysical dimensions of human existence. Hobsbawm, while evaluating changes brought by the typical rationale of the capitalist system, offers an interesting hypothesis regarding this subject.²³ He affirms that capitalism, although built based on market forces and focused on the search for advantage by the individual, always depends on relationships and social ties outside of its core objectives. He also suggests that, at the start of capitalism, family values, work habits, loyalty, and obedience nourished ways of behavior far from the theory of rational-choice based on the maximization of profit.

Presenting a similar argument, Ravetz says that the transmission and construction of scientific knowledge happened until the middle of the twentieth century in a context that used community ties, master-disciple relationships, and apprenticeship along with rigorous methodologies.²⁴ These reflections allow us to suggest that the enchanted stories, traditions, and theodicies typical of these social arrangements could still be present and remain plausible today. Paraphrasing Hobsbawm, we could say that science won not only because it is scientific.²⁵

Specifically in the field of health, it is within the practice of medicine that *powerful non-scientific forces* have been noticed. These behaviors distance themselves from the canons of scientific methodology.²⁶ That is to say, over the course of the rationalization and scientization of life which was implemented with modernity, it is likely that doctors and patients have maintained habits and behaviors *inherited from the past*, in addition to instrumental scientific rationality. In this way, the cosmic

²³Eric Hobsbawm, *Era dos extremos: o breve século XX: 1914-1991* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995).

²⁴Jerome Ravetz, *Scientific Knowledge and its Social Problems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

²⁵Eric Hobsbawm, op. cit., *Era dos extremos*, p. 336.

²⁶Marco António Porto, "O Método está nu! Lupicínio, Latour e a medicina moderna," *Revista da Sociedade Brasileira de História da Ciência* 12 (1994): 99-106.

narratives and theodicies would not have been silenced, but still inspire people, guide life, teach how to heal, and explain death.

In the 1980s, the disappearance of this *historic fund* would reveal difficulties in operating without such an inheritance. That is, the absence of the old value systems and customs would make capitalism problematic, science utilitarian, the medicines mercenary, and, paradoxically, would initiate the so-called modernity crises. This loss was felt and reflected in movements focused on the recovery of fragments of the past, kept conscientiously by the dispossessed of modernity.

Hobsbawm refers to the erosion of the historical advantages of capitalism and to the beginning of neo-liberalism as a cultural revolution.²⁷ During this revolution, starting in the 1960s, he identifies a return to the values previous to modernity: a sense of national or religious ethnic identity, and nostalgia for community, family, and nature.

In truth, the post-modern condition is born with the discrediting of an entire civilization. It is within this wide social movement that alternative therapies and complementary medicines are developed, bringing with them rationalities and knowledge from other cultures which do not avoid the sacred, the religious, or, in the end, the mystery; it is the re-enchantment of the world.

Brazilian Religions in the Post-Modern Context

The cultural changes that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century brought an interesting lesson to the social sciences: they showed that planners and sociologists ignored the wise words of Weber when the German sociologist alerted us to the involuntary consequences of collective actions. Modern thinkers waited for the disappearance of religion. However, it came back with a thousand faces, playing with such serious things as the care of the mind and body.

To start, it is necessary to emphasize the reduction in the number of followers of the traditional Christian religions. Catholicism, Brazil's traditional and official religion, has been declining since the 1970s. Along with Catholicism stands Lutheranism, with a noticeable decline, although less than that of Catholicism. To complete this picture, the Umbanda religion, very connected to our national identity, shows a relative retraction

²⁷Eric Hobsbawm, *Era dos extremos: o breve século XX: 1914-1991* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1995).

as well. In truth, this would be the inevitable destiny of the major traditional religions when confronted with the modernization process.²⁸

However, there are religions that have been growing over the past twenty years. It should be emphasized here that primarily Pentecostalism has shown an extraordinary vigor. Along with them is one category that has been intriguing observers, the *without religion*; they also present quite a significant growth rate. Moreover, the Spiritists show constant growth during the same period. So, if on the one hand, the emptying of traditional religions is attributed to the de-traditionalizing of Brazilian society, on the other hand there is also a mobilization of the population, now free of ties, in search of other religious expressions.

The secularization and decline of the traditions freed individuals of their religious commitments and opened space for a flood of diverse religious experiences. This space was partially occupied by new religious movements, an apparently heteroclitic group of religious expressions originating from various cultural traditions with a strong *Eastern* influence.

Among the various religious forms of expression which nurture new religious movements, there are some which carry out the function of preserving the cultural heritage of their respective ethnic group.²⁹ This function is especially prominent among religions of Japanese origin. However, in the 1960s, these religions stopped catering only to the immigrant community and their descendents and opened themselves to the rest of Brazilian society, transforming them into universal religions, opened to the conversion of all people.³⁰ In this process, the Universal Messianic

²⁸Antônio F. Pierucci, “‘Bye bye, Brasil’ – O declínio das religiões tradicionais no Censo 2000,” *Estudos Avançados* 18/52 (2004): 17-28.

²⁹Cândido P.F. de Camargo et al., *Católicos, protestantes, espíritas* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1973).

³⁰Hiranclair R. Gonçalves, *Perfect Liberty: o fascínio de uma religião japonesa no Brasil* (M.A. diss., São Paulo: Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 1998); Idem, *O fascínio do Johrei: um estudo sobre a religião messiânica no Brasil* (Ph.D. diss., São Paulo: Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2003); and Leila Marrach B. de Albuquerque, *Seicho-no-ie do Brasil: agradecimento, obediência e salvação* (São Paulo: Annablume; FAPESP, 1999).

Church of Brazil stands out. According to 2000 census data, it has 109,000 members, the majority of which are Brazilians without Japanese ancestry.³¹

Among the various characteristics of the new religious movements already discussed, it is important for this study to highlight the value placed on physical contact as a means of compensation for and rejection of intellectualized religion.³² The importance of the body resulted in the development of a group of practices and therapeutic knowledge impregnated with religiosity. That is, in the new religious movements, the physical and therapeutic aspects unfold into physical and mental care through a variety of paths: environmental, oriental medicine, non-conventional psychology, and natural treatments, along with prayers, rituals, dances, meditations, and other procedures full of religiosity; all focused on the same objectives. Soares describes a common trait to these manifestations: the use of the category *energy* as a passport, which identifies the militant environmentalist, the alternative therapist or the follower of *Eastern religions*.³³

In truth, the energy category, surrounded by all of the typical misunderstandings when it circulates among the wide range of new religious movements, seems to resuscitate the idea of a vitalism that enlivens and organizes living beings, which is contrary to the perception that they are an inert mass defined by mechanistic laws.

³¹Hiranclair R. Gonçalves, *O fascínio do Johrei: um estudo sobre a religião messiânica no Brasil* (Ph.D. diss., São Paulo: Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2003).

³²Leila Marrach B. de Albuquerque, "Estrutura e dinâmica dos novos movimentos religiosos," in Beatriz Muniz de Souza and Luiz Mauro S. Martino, orgs, *Sociologia da Religião e mudança social* (São Paulo: Paulus, 2004), pp. 139-150.

³³Luiz Eduardo Soares, "Religioso por natureza: cultura alternativa e misticismo ecológico no Brasil," *O rigor da Indisciplina* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1994), pp. 189-212.

Religious Worlds and Healing Procedures

THE UNIVERSAL MESSIANIC CHURCH OF BRAZIL

The Universal Messianic Church of Brazil is one of the most prominent forms of expression of a religious movement which appeared in Japan in 1935 under the leadership of Mokichi Okada.³⁴ Historically speaking, Japan was undergoing a huge social transformation at that time which created an environment very favorable to the emergence of new sects. In fact, many new religious movements appeared in Japan during the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. These religions are characterized by their critical evaluation of the new paths followed in Japan, through syncretic proposals that combine traditional Japanese religions, Christianity, and Western thought.

In all of them there is a hagiography of founders filled with stories of material and spiritual suffering that favor a radical religious experience leading to the creation of cults which had varying degrees of success. Pereira analyzes these phenomena from the point of view of the traumatic personal events that led to the mystical experiences of both founders of Oomoto kyo and Tenrikyo.³⁵ Moreover, depending on the political ability of the leadership, there were also varying degrees of acceptance by the Japanese state.

This was also the case with Mokichi Okada and the Messianic Religion.³⁶ His impoverished childhood, poor health in his youth, and his arts studies strongly influenced his doctrine. His dialogue with the historical situation of Japan was done, basically, through his refusal to accept the

³⁴The Brazilian rendering of the founder's name is Mokiti Okada and he is called Meishu-Sama (Lord of Light) by his followers all over the world.

³⁵Ronan Alves Pereira, *Possessão por espírito e inovação cultural: a experiência religiosa das japonesas Miki Nakayama e Nao Degushi* (São Paulo: Aliança Cultural Brasil-Japão; Massao Ohno, 1992).

³⁶Peter B. Clarke, "Movimentos milenaristas japoneses e o papel do Brasil na construção do paraíso na Terra. A Igreja Messiânica Mundial (Sekai Yusei Kyo)," *Ilha. Revista de Antropologia* 2/2 (2000): 104-123; and Hiranclair R. Gonçalves, *O fascínio do Johrei: um estudo sobre a religião messiânica no Brasil* (PhD diss., São Paulo: Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2003).

principles of modernization, especially those resulting from modern science. His main argument states that the cultures and religions that arrived in Japan from the West did not bring happiness because they were an escape from the natural order. According to Okada, humanity needed the Light of the Orient to find happiness. He expressed this message symbolically through images of the movement of the Sun and the natural order of nature. Mokichi Okada himself was born in a neighborhood east of Tokyo. These would be signs to reinforce his mission of bringing an era of peace, harmony, and happiness.

As with other founders of the new Japanese sects, Mokichi Okada presents his doctrine as an ultra-religion which, without objecting to the others, tries to integrate and adapt them to a new era. He argues that, for each era, God sends his messenger. In this way, everyone avoids confrontation with the already established religions.

Built upon the three pillars of truth, goodness, and beauty, the Messianic Church has developed many activities, some of which are: the healing of diseases through *johrei*, natural agriculture through an organic substrate called Nutri-Bokashi, the process of raising Korin birds, the cultivation of the arts through Ikebana courses, and the collection of masterpieces in their own museums. Its objective is to offer its followers the end of misery, disease, and conflict, with a view towards the construction of a Terrestrial Paradise, referred to by Mokichi Okada as the New Era. Because of these characteristics, the Messianic Church doctrine, in some aspects, resembles the alternative ideas of many new religious movements. It should also be mentioned that, from the time of the first Mokichi Okada teachings up to the present, the Messianic Church has suffered much dissension within Japan which, in some cases, has been reproduced in Brazil.³⁷

In the messianic doctrine, the concept of purification is extremely important, with regards to both the material world and the spiritual world. Therefore, disease, conflict, and poverty, as well as natural catastrophes are thought of as a reflection of a stain on the spiritual world produced by bad thoughts. Evaluated by this movement, the history of humanity reveals to us that the scientific process has generated these stains through the use of

³⁷Hiranclair R. Gonçalves, *O fascínio do Johrei: um estudo sobre a religião messiânica no Brasil*, (Ph.D. diss., São Paulo: Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2003), pp. 83-86.

agrochemicals in agriculture, materialism in medicine, un-natural eating habits in health, and the accumulation of garbage and the polluting of the environment. It still glimpses a Final Judgment, equivalent to natural selection, in order to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth.³⁸

As we can observe in the following teachings, the history of the creation of the world follows this purpose:

The universe is constituted of three fundamental elements: Sun, Moon, and Earth, formed, respectively, by the essence of fire, water, and earth, generating the Spiritual World, the Atmospheric World, and the Material World, which merge and harmonize perfectly. Until now, only the Atmospheric and Material World[s] have been recognized. In fact, the Spiritual World is more important than the other two combined, because it constitutes the fundamental force...This ignorance has led humanity to not believe in the invisible and, as a result, Evil has appeared...Therefore, we can conclude that the mission of Evil was the creation of a material culture. As a consequence, at this moment, God's plan marks the advent and realization of a Terrestrial Paradise through the construction of a spiritual culture, which will totally eliminate Evil.³⁹

Johrei is also presented within the context of human history. It emphasizes the freedom of hands movement, inherent to all human beings. Found in one of their theological pieces was the following explanation:

These free hands aren't only natural tools for building things. They are creative hands for preserving nature...Since long ago, man has used his hands to assist the ill. According to the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth, when coming across a sick person, put his hands over the person and the illness was cured. Meishu-Sama speaks of the mysterious value of these free hands, emphasizing the higher meaning of the spirituality that shines in them. With

³⁸Igreja Messiânica Mundial do Brasil (hereafter IMMB), *Curso para iniciantes* 1 (Cenário atual da humanidade [s.l.], 1998).

³⁹Idem, *Curso para iniciantes* 2 (O caminho para reequilíbrio do planeta [s.l.], 1998), pp. 8-9.

them, we realize the divine act, *johrei*, the technique of the Messianic Church...Man has different characteristics from other mammals. With his free hands, he has the power of putting himself in the position of being a mediator of the mystery.⁴⁰

A belief in reincarnation is also a part of their theological construction. However, it is not emphasized in their teachings among Brazilians.

Starting from this cosmogony, the Messianic Church constructs an anthropological presupposition to their doctrine, in which the man-nature relationship has a predominant role throughout history, theology, and human destiny. In the Messianic Church, there is a basis for restrictions to material advancements resulting from sciences related to medicine, food, chemical agriculture, and the medical system, all of which are impregnated by pollutants and toxins, and are distant from the forces of nature.

However, science is not completely eliminated from the procedures of Meishu-Sama. In many parts of the world, the Messianic Church encourages a scientific evaluation of its practices through scientific research. As Kawai explains:

Through his scientific quest, man penetrates, each time more deeply, into the micro and macro world, until he reaches a union between theoretical science and conceptual religion. Meishu-Sama referred to this important issue, teaching that the religious concept cannot and must not stand only as a statement of faith...This is an important means of reviving the spirit of man to God's existence and to grant faith in him.⁴¹

Johrei

Johrei is a compound word of two ideograms, *Joh* (to purify) and *Rei* (spirit), and it has been translated as "baptism by fire." Its performance has

⁴⁰Naoyuki Kawai, *O homem, ser religioso* (São Paulo: Fundação Messiânica do Brasil, 1972), pp. 29-30.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 40.

taken on many features and has received different names throughout Messianic history, before assuming its current name and practice.⁴²

Johrei is offered at the Messianic Church headquarters and at *Johrei* Centers, in the praying room itself, which offers easy visibility to passers-by. There, people are always available to apply *johrei*. The official definition states that *johrei* is a “scientific-religious activity which aims at eradicating the latent causes of humanity’s suffering, manifesting surprising miracles.”⁴³

It is taught that the follower is capable of giving *johrei* after he or she receives a type of reliquary, called an *ohikari*, which is given by the institution after a course that grants the power to channel divine energy through the hands.⁴⁴ Moreover, this reliquary must always be with the channeller, as a pendant, hung around the neck at chest height. Its use is surrounded by taboos, such as: it cannot be lent; it should be taken off only for bathing; it cannot be mixed with other objects; if it falls down, it must go through rituals towards its re-consecration.

The Messianic doctrine states that *johrei* is the transmission of a ball of light existent in Meishu-Sama’s body, from the channeller to the receiver. The *ohikari*, in turn, is the representation of his Light. As Mokichi Okada explains:

The world of the *ohikari* and I are connected by a spiritual link of an invisible nature. Through this link, the Light that radiates through me flows incessantly to the *ohikari* and to the minister’s body, being then radiated through the palms of his hands.⁴⁵

It is recommended by the Messianic Church that, when giving *Johrei*, the channeller should maintain an attitude of prayer, in silence,

⁴²Hiranclair R. Gonçalves, *O fascínio do Johrei: um estudo sobre a religião messiânica no Brasil* (Ph.D. diss., Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2003), pp. 83-86.

⁴³IMMB, *Curso para iniciantes 2* (O caminho para reequilíbrio do planeta, [s.l.], 1998), p. 5.

⁴⁴IMMB, *Curso para iniciantes 3* (O fundador, sua missão e o johrei, [s.l.], 1998), p. 9-10.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

because this is “a sacred act that connects us to God and Meishu-Sama.”⁴⁶ And also, with regard to body posture and the positioning of hands, they teach, “We should let the arms relax, without swinging the hands, and the fingers should be lightly united. It is essential that the Light flow freely.” The *johrei* session lasts between ten and thirty minutes and the distance between the channeller and the receiver ranges from thirty centimeters to one meter. The performance of the channeller and receiver follows some rules: initially *johrei* is given to the front part of the receiver’s body, and afterwards to his back. It is also important to note that there are certain points to where the energy should be directed, such as the head, neck, shoulders, upper back, kidneys, and the inguinal region.⁴⁷

However, *johrei* does not need the presence of the receiver to be applied. The followers of the Messianic Church say that *johrei* can be directed towards a person who is at a long distance.⁴⁸

Finally, through this practice it is expected that the stains of the spiritual body will be erased. These stains are thought to materialize in the physical body as toxins and impurities, typical of a life in disagreement with the laws of nature.

Spiritism in Brazil

Spiritism appeared in France in the middle of the twentieth century, starting with studies conducted by educationalist, Léon Hyppolite Dénizart Rivail, also known under the pen name of Allan Kardec, regarding unusual phenomena such as psychographic messages, table-turning, and talking tables (a precursor to the Ouiji board). Inspired by the strong scientific climate of European positivism, Kardec tries to give to his analysis the character of a rational critique, which leads him to define Spiritism as philosophy, science, and religion all-in-one.

As Camargo teaches, this spiritual doctrine is based on two central ideas: reincarnation and medianimity.⁴⁹ The idea of reincarnation predicts an evolution of humanity through a successive process of incarnations,

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁷“Johrei e ciência: juntos pelo bem da humanidade,” *Johrei, a energia do novo milênio* (São Paulo: Mythos, 2001), p. 19.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁹Cândido P.F. de Camargo et al., *Católicos, protestantes, espíritas* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1973).

which is responsible for making progressive steps towards spiritual perfection. Spiritism has its foundation in the karmic law, certainly of Hindu inspiration, which confers to the individual responsibility for their spiritual growth. Therefore, Spiritism is a system of thought based on the idea of evolution. The theory of medianimity assumes the possibility of communication with spirits of the dead through mediums. In this process, the living and the dead interact: spirits of light through teaching and healing; evil spirits through obsessions and *encostos*.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the author explains that these assumptions were tempered by both Christian ethics and the teachings of the Gospels. Spiritism considers Christ to be the greatest incarnated entity and values the practice of charity and developing a strong vocation to volunteer work. Moreover, Hindu ideas were also reinterpreted within the same framework so that the karmic doctrine does not apply to all life forms as it does with metempsychosis, but is only restricted to humans.

It is interesting to call attention to this aspect. The idea of reincarnation, in its original form in India, presupposes that all beings – minerals, vegetables, and animals – are animated and reincarnate. In addition, they go from one kingdom to another without implying an idea of evolution and without a specific direction that involves the material world. This certainly has had consequences for the idea of nature and marks the attitude of man regarding his natural environment. On the other hand, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, man distinguishes himself from the rest of nature through Original Sin – his only defining attribute. Animals, plants, and minerals are not *animated* in that they do not have a soul. The transposition of the idea of reincarnation to the West was constrained by the Christian idea of Original Sin, which led to the abandoning of metempsychosis and to the restriction of reincarnation to humans alone.

As part of the virtues of charity, we find the treatment and cure of diseases through the laying-on of hands. On the other hand, in the *Book of Mediums*, Kardec deals with healing mediums by differentiating them from the mesmerisers, and explains:

We will now only remark that this type of medianimity consists principally in the gift possessed by certain persons, of healing by

⁵⁰*Encostos* are a form of evil spirit which stays with the person, encouraging them to behave badly.

the laying-on of hands, by the look, by a mere gesture, and without the help of medication...It is evident that the animal-magnetic fluid has much to do with it; but when this phenomenon is carefully examined, we perceive that there is in it something more...The intervention of an occult power, which constitutes medianimity, becomes unmistakable under certain circumstances; especially when we consider that the majority of those who may be regarded as undoubted healing mediums have recourse to prayer; for prayer is unquestionably an *invocation* as well as an *evocation*.⁵¹

The arrival of Kardec's doctrine in Brazil was facilitated by the presence, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, of a group of homeopaths concerned with healing issues. As a matter of fact, Kardec gives an account of his dialogue with the spirit of Hahnemann, and the support offered for his work.⁵² In this way, Kardec's approach becomes a part of the same world of restless preoccupations regarding magnetism, homeopathy, and spiritual healings. This is illustrated in the following passage from Maes' psychographic work:

Therefore, Homeopathy is already a medicine of psychic order, capable of draining from the disorderly mind the harmful residues of the ill, in perfect sympathy with Spiritism, which explains to man, "to sin no more" and, like this, to enjoy your wellbeing!⁵³

When transposed to Brazil, Spiritism had some of its aspects emphasized to the detriment of others. In this way, the scientific and experimental dimensions of spiritual phenomena as well as the accompanying philosophical reflections were made secondary in relation to the religious aspects. Chico Xavier himself, through the spirit Emmanuel, contrast:

⁵¹Allan Kardec, *The Mediums' Book: Being the Sequel to "The Spirits' Book"* (Rio de Janeiro: Federação Espírita Brasileira, 1986), pp. 185-186, (http://www.sgny.org/main/Books/The_Mediums_Book.pdf).

⁵²Idem, *Obras póstumas* (São Paulo: LAKE, 1988).

⁵³Hercílio Maes, *A missão do espiritismo* (São Paulo: Freitas Bastos, 1974).

While in Europe, the Spiritualist idea was only an object of observation and research in the laboratory, or of grand, sterile discussions on philosophical terrain...Spiritism penetrates Brazil with all the characteristics of a resuscitated Christianity, uplifting souls to the dawn of a new faith.⁵⁴

It is common to classify Kardec's Spiritism in Brazil as part of the group of psychic religions that, along with Umbanda, form a gradual syncretism, in which the extreme opposite poles would be the "white table" of Spiritism at one end and the Umbanda "*terreiro*" at the other.⁵⁵ The centrality of possession in this classification marks one of the Spiritist aspects of Brazilian society. However, as Stoll shows, another form of expression, which blends with Catholicism, is also possible.⁵⁶ According to Stoll, it was due to the Catholic ethos that Brazilian Spiritism shaped its identity in opposition to the French scientific model. Certainly, both traditions are present in many of the Spiritist expressions established in Brazil. As this author demonstrates, in 1998, almost half of Brazil's practicing Catholics believed in reincarnation. In addition, mediums from all over Brazil are currently reinforcing this trend by putting forward an emphasis on self-help and New Age thinking.

SPIRITUAL PASSE

Chico Xavier expressed the *passé* in this way:

Jesus, with his sweet and compassionate hands, revived in a country blessed by his teachings, wonderful healings at the time of the apostles. Self-sacrificing medium healers...healing the ill,

⁵⁴Francisco Cândido Xavier, *Brasil, coração do mundo, pátria do Evangelho* (Rio de Janeiro: Federação Espírita Brasileira, 1938), p. 178.

⁵⁵Cândido P.F. de Camargo et al., *Católicos, protestantes, espíritas* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1973), p. 27.

⁵⁶Sandra J. Stoll, "Narrativas biográficas: a construção da identidade espírita no Brasil e sua fragmentação," *Estudos Avançados* 18/52 (2004): 181-92.

these new disciples of the Lord re-established the spirit of the people for the grand task.⁵⁷

It is, therefore, from this cultural melting pot that the *passe* receives its efficacy. In Spiritism, the cure for physical illness is given by *passes*, prayers and recipes of medicinal teas, or more specialized formulas, possibly provided by a faculty of medium healers. Mediums are people endowed with a special power to communicate with the spirits. However, as the Spiritist doctrine states, we all have these powers, but, in some people they manifest spontaneously and in others they need to be developed. Because of this, there are courses that define and orient this practice. Allan Kardec had already addressed the topic of healing:

If you magnetize with the intention of healing, for instance, and evoke a good Spirit who is interested in you and in your patient, he will increase the force of your will, steer the energy flow, and give you the abilities necessary.⁵⁸

In this explanation, the three factors responsible for healing are given: man's magnetic power, the help of spirits, and the will to heal.

Healing through the *passe* is done by the medium, guiding his hands over the ill or the region of the illness while maintaining a short distance from the body. Its duration is, according to teachings, equal to "One very slow 'Our Father' (approximately two minutes)."⁵⁹ The treatment can be done with the palm of the hands, the tips of the fingers, or with a light touch. A stronger contact such as through friction or hugging is inadvisable. While the patient should be sitting or, if necessary, lying down, the medium must stand or sit. In addition, *passes* can be longitudinal, rotary or dispersive, with each technique leading to different results.⁶⁰

In summary, the *passe* should be done in a quiet and discrete place called a *passe* chamber, with little light, in order to avoid curiosity and the

⁵⁷Francisco Cândido Xavier, *Brasil, coração do mundo, pátria do Evangelho* (Rio de Janeiro: Federação Espírita Brasileira, 1938), p. 177.

⁵⁸Aurélio A. Valente, *Sessões práticas e doutrinárias do Espiritismo* (Brasília: Federação Espírita Brasileira, 1990), p. 106.

⁵⁹Casa dos Espíritas, *Apostila do passe* (Rio Claro, São Paulo), p. 3.

⁶⁰Valente, *Sessões práticas e doutrinárias do Espiritismo*, pp. 107-108.

dispersion of attention. The medium must be silent, and maintain an attitude of reflection and prayer.

Medium Divaldo Franco explains:

In the field of energy exchange, the *passe* signifies what the blood transfusion represents to the exchange of red blood corpuscles, which helps the circulatory system. The *passe* is a donation of energy that we put within reach of the ones with deficiencies, in a way that they can have their vital centers re-stimulated and, as a result, recover their equilibrium or their health, if it were the case...It is a transfusion of energy of the donor. The *passe* which we apply in the Spirit Centers, is the result of a tuning with Superior Spirits. It is helpful to think of it as more of a mental tuning in, rather than as a connection for the purpose of embodiment.⁶¹

The *passe* is based on the presupposition of the existence of a universal flow of energy, or “fluid” that permeates the carnal body as well as the spirit, with strong healing powers, when it is transmitted appropriately. The spiritists teach that:

The incarnate or disincarnate spirit is the propelling agent that infiltrates a deteriorating body with part of the fluidic substance of its sheath. Healing happens through the substitution of an unhealthy molecule with a healthy molecule. Therefore the healing power will be, for obvious reasons, based on of the purity of the projected substance and on the donor’s will, which, the greater it is, the greater will be the fluidic emission, and more penetration power will be given to the fluid.⁶²

In fact, the causes of and responsibility for illness belong to man himself due to a disorderly life of alcohol use, cigarettes, drugs or wild sex, as well as sinful attitudes, addictions, pride, vanity, etc. or karmic

⁶¹Divaldo Franco, “Diretrizes e segurança: passes, perguntas e respostas,” *Presença Espírita* (s.l.), p. 44.

⁶²Casa dos Espíritas, *Apostila do passe* (Rio Claro, São Paulo), p. 2

inheritance from other incarnations. Conversely, the absence of these factors is attributed to a life of happiness.

The healing gesture is emphatically attributed to antiquity, particularly among the people of Egypt and Greece. Jesus is always remembered by the laying-on of his hands over the sick. The history – which contemplates the obscurantism of the Middle Ages, Mesmer's investigations, and Kardec's research – grants to the *passe* a cosmological dimension. In addition, part of the teachings of the *passe* involves a description of the yogic *chakras*, understood as centers of vital force through which the universal cosmic fluid permeates the human body. In a sense, they create an invisible map of the human body composed of the following centers, or *chakras*: crown, third eye, throat, heart, solar plexus, sacral, and root chakras.

Moreover, the scientific rhetoric is woven into the Kardecist language, as Greenfield explains:

Spiritism is invariably presented as a science that codifies the wider laws of the invisible world. Scientific terminology is used in the discussion of reincarnation, karma, and spiritual evolution and the basic beliefs are presented as laws.⁶³

However, this can be regarded as one more analogy between religions, precepts, and scientific presuppositions rather than a precise scientific approach towards the facts.

Corporeities and Healing Techniques

The learning of healing gestures and the corporeity's associated with them happens, as with other corporeal techniques, through many sources. These range from the most formal, such as courses and religious bibliography readings, to the most informal, such as living together, storytelling, imitation, and apprenticeship. Through healing gestures, the body becomes sacred, achieving distinctive power in both *johrei* and Spiritism. To heal and be healed by hands, the body gains dimensions out of the everyday code.

⁶³Sidney M. Greenfield, *Cirurgias do além: pesquisas antropológicas sobre curas espirituais* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1999), p. 87.

This sacredness expands throughout such space and confers to it special meanings. Among the Messianic, meaning is derived from a historic process defined by dualities such as Oriental/Occidental, Eastern/Western, and traditional/modern to explain illness, misfortune, and human suffering. On the other hand, for the Spiritists, the care of the healer grants to the space special characteristics, proper for the performance of the healing gesture. However, for both religions you can heal at a distance, applying the *passé* or *johrei*. On the other hand, something still distinguishes them regarding space: the *passé* is applied in a place that evokes discretion and reflection. For *johrei*, there is no such worry and it even seems that public exposure is almost a part of its procedure, considering that places where *johrei* is applied are easily seen from the street.

In the Universal Messianic Church, the corporeities are trapped within the duality of natural versus anti-natural, which involves this and other lives. This naturalization of the care of the body has, as a basis, a rejection of the transformations brought by the process of modernization. As a result, this religion produces bodies with cosmic dimensions, granted by the energies of the natural elements of earth, water, and fire. The sum of these elements produces divine energy, or divine light, granted only by Meishu-Sama – he grants it to man through the healing gesture.

The loss of the natural state is attributed to a historic process, which brought impurities, toxins, and illnesses. Through the healing gesture, a natural life that refuses modern innovation returns history back to its intended direction and the body returns to being healthy. In other words, both history and body recover to their natural state. In summary, the hands are instruments for man to recover his primordial nature, through the divine energy granted to Meishu-Sama. The ideal of the body, for the Messianic, is in nature.

In Kardec's doctrine, the body is trapped by the accountability required for actions conducted in this and other lives. In this way, the condition of the body is a consequence of what has occurred with the spirit and perispirit [or aura] among the living and the dead. Moreover, the body is full of fluids and energies mobilized by the will and desire through medianimity. Illness would be the result of the tension that exists between free-will and karma. Therefore, the body has a moral dimension which, for Spiritists, is the result of a combination of choices and destiny, which affects the perispirit either through illness or healing.

The healing gesture is an attribute of all people, from the beginning, because we are all mediums. The psychic experience of healing,

sacred because it is exceptional, confers to the body sacred attributes through spirits, fluids, and energies. It is present throughout all history, both visible and invisible, and is received in a variety of expressions. Consequently, the gift of healing is democratically available to all of humanity from time immemorial, because we all possess energies and fluids. In Spiritism, the healing gesture is more of a symbol than an act of healing power for the benefit of all mankind.

Although the idea of energy is a category of central understanding for both religions – both *johrei* and the *passe* mobilize energies – this idea presents different attributes to each of them. In Meishu-Sama's doctrine, energies originate from the kingdom of nature, according to definitions of reality typical of pre-modern cultural traditions. They express a resuscitation of tradition. On the other hand, among the Spiritists, the energies are clearly from the supernatural kingdom, based on a conception of the world which understands sacred and profane dimensions. As Soares has already highlighted, the idea of energy is an important common trait within alternative therapeutic-religious expressions.⁶⁴ However, its strong presence in Kardecism, beginning the nineteenth century, suggests that the "idea of energy" was a category of crucial understanding to religions born after the scientific revolution.

The attributes of the idea of energy in both religions depict the mode in which each religion confronts their disenchantment with the world brought about by modernity and science. Energy symbolically represents the dialogue between these religions with the scientific universe. It establishes a relationship between the enchanted and disenchanted worlds by offering definitions of the sacred and profane with characteristics typical of the cultural and historical period in which these different religions were born, and from where they became plausible.

In this way, among the Spiritists, the idea of energy approximates the vitalistic model that was very present in the European intellectual scene at the end of the nineteenth century. They carry a triumphant conception of science, which promises a better life through a control of nature (remember, it was Kardec that used to carry out experiments). On the other hand, the Messianics are completely against the scientific interventions of man in the

⁶⁴Luiz Eduardo Soares, "Religioso por natureza: cultura alternativa e misticismo ecológico no Brasil," in *O rigor da indisciplina* (Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 1994), pp. 189-212.

world, seeing them as a deviation from the natural state. However, they do not discard the word of science when it is evaluating or legitimizing the power of *johrei*. These would then be an expression of a critical and also post-modern science, which is breaking down the barriers between scientific and religious thinking, especially within the alternative movement.

In fact, their relationship to medicine demonstrates very well the dispositions of each when forced to face scientific achievements: for the Spiritists, the *passe* does not lead, absolutely, to the abandoning of medicine. They are very careful to advise the continuity of medical treatments, allopathic or homeopathic, in addition to the spiritual. In contrast, for the Messianics, the dropping of medicine and other scientific resources is part of their spiritual care, an essential part of a healthy and good life.

Triumphalists on one side and post-modernists on the other, introduce in this dialogue with science corporeities typical of their participation in the history of modernity. For both, the body is inscribed with the idea of paleo-knowledge as vital energy, natural elements, fluids, ethereal forces, wills, desires, spirits, perispirits, *encostos*, and healing powers, innate or granted. In one case, they are in harmony with a progressive science and, in the other, in opposition to a threatening science. In both, science was again re-signified in the field of theodicy, which either legitimizes or discredits science. These would be ways to tolerate modernity and let science exist.