

## LIFE AND DEATH IN KARDECIST SPIRITISM

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### Abstract:

The paper analyses from an anthropological perspective how Brazilian Spiritism **resignifies** the current notions of life and death, comparing the notion of reincarnation with the Christian and Catholic notion of purgatory. The search for understanding of the processes of identity construction in this religious system leads to the examination of the notions of reincarnation, karma, evolution, mediumship and probation, which are central to Kardecian cosmology. With this active set of notions, Spiritism proposes a rich set of perspectives about the self, and simultaneously graduates and softens the otherness of death.

**Key words:** Spiritism, reincarnation, self, identity, otherness. Life and death in Kardecian Spiritism

***Introductory note:** At the beginning of the 1980s, when I researched Kardecist Spiritism (Cavalcanti 1983), this religion was placed in the bibliography then available as standing close to the Afro-Brazilian religions (Brown 1986; Warren 1968 among others), which had been considerably studied since the early stages of sociological reflection in Brazil. According to the interpretation at the time (Camargo 1961), the religions involving mediums or clairvoyants (especially Kardecism, Candomblé and Umbanda) would form a sort of great continuum that would encompass relatively “conscious” and “rational” forms of mediumistic trance, ‘emotional’ behaviors and relatively ‘ethical’ or ‘magical’ doctrines.*

*In contrast, adopting an analytical perspective based on ideas and concepts from the French sociological school (Durkheim 1968, Durkheim and Mauss 1978, Lévi-Strauss 1976, 1993), my book considered Spiritism as a symbolic integrated system featuring a specific cosmology and ritual system. An urban and scholarly religion, which expanded discretely among middle class sectors and whose internal logic exerted active pressure on the incorporation of elements proceeding from other religious origins.*

*In the last twenty years, Brazilian religions have undergone important changes. As for Spiritism, the most recent bibliography, most notably Stoll (2003) and Lewgoy (2004), both emphasized in their own ways, the ‘Brazilian’ or ‘Catholic influenced’ dimension that Spiritism adopted, given the outstanding influence of medium Chico Xavier through the second half of the 20th century. Spiritism was to unfold as part of a syncretic trend with a clear Catholic prevalence, which has permeated an important segment of present Brazilian culture.*

*I agree in general with this argument and try to contribute to the present reflection on the concepts of death and life in Spiritism, through a dialogue with the most recent production on the subject. Hence, I follow Sanchis' suggestion (1994) to focus on the old problem of syncretism, analytically centering ourselves on the religious system which serves as a chosen basis for the comparative exercise, a sort of 'departure or basic system' that would operate as a matrix-system, which enlightens with new semantics the additions and loans taken from the "other system".*

## **I. Life and death in Kardecist Spiritism <sup>1</sup>**

"The Society Beyond the Tomb and the society on Earth are one and same thing, one is the continuation of the other in different phases; the only difficulty being that the former is invisible and sometimes ignored by the latter "  
(Yvonne Pereira in 'Memories of mediumship')  
apud Cavalcanti (1983: 79).

Our subject is the conceptions of life and death under the viewpoint of Kardecist Spiritism. Thus, I return to my first anthropological interest: mediumistic religions. This is a subject through which I personally confronted my own fears derived from the Catholic education of the times, which regarded the actions of the "spirits" as something devilish. By researching such an issue I have tried to demonstrate academically that Spiritism is a particular symbolic system on its own right, which has become a relevant part of present Brazilian religious life. (Cavalcanti 1983, 1985 and 1990).

Recently, while reflecting on the ethnographic experience I had while researching into Spiritism and the Rio de Janeiro Carnival, I was surprised to hear myself stating: "In Spiritism I discovered the logic and efficiency of a very coherent and complex symbolic system that, with ingenuity and persistence, has tried to undo the opposition between life and death, by means of its fabulous cosmological and ritual construction" (Cavalcanti 2003).

I hereby follow this clue, trying to show, in a schematic way, how the spiritist symbolic system gives new significance to the idea of death. A spiritist would never say that somebody has died, but simply that they have "disincarnated". A series of taboos, however, surrounds the period immediately following "disincarnation," until the relationship between the worlds in which a spirit wanders has, let us say, become normal again. Death is perceived as a "journey" between different worlds. This effort towards the dissolution of the idea of death causes the re-signification of life, due to the systematic and daily incorporation of the "dead" in the life of the "living"; or in spiritist jargon, disincarnate spirits active in the life of incarnate spirits.

The concept of life beyond the tomb is a critical concept in extremely diverse religious systems and it has followed human societies since very remote times<sup>2</sup>. The Christian idea of resurrection and eternal life, in turn, gave rise to innumerable theological elaborations throughout the history of Christianity, especially in Catholicism, and it still holds great popular appeal (Le Goff 1981).

Within the limits of this text, I simply try to outline the particular contours of spiritist belief in life beyond the tomb, as it is from this imagined place that the spirits permanently communicate with the living, giving life its particular coloring.

## **II. Relational death and the problems of individuation**

In a reflection on death in Brazilian society, Da Matta (1997) related the abstract, impersonal concept of death, that is, death seen as a philosophical and existential problem, to the emergence of modern individualism in occidental societies (Dumont 1966). However, for many other societies, especially those that we term pre-modern, traditional or tribal, where a sense of totality prevails over particular elements, what really matters says Da Matta, is not death itself, but the deceased, always immersed in a wide network of relationships which are lasting and prevailing. Unbreakable affective links continue to unite the living and the dead in active relationships, which have characteristic sociological importance and value. Hence, the 'other world' plays a decisive complementary role regarding the world of the living. Along with its very own process of modernization, Brazilian society strongly adjusted to this relational dynamic. Da Matta suggested that the Catholic world, widely understood, is the cosmological basis for this relational vision of death, where "death kills, but the deceased do not die" (op.cit.: 158). In contrast to the world of protestant religion, which, as described in the classic study by Weber (1967), builds a single and cohesive moral world, the Catholic world is "(...) multiple and segmented, (...) where relations play an enormous role, allowing passage from one area to another, as it is outlined by means of complementary but also segmented spaces "(op.cit.: 152).

Spiritism appears to take part in this symbolic configuration in a particularly explicit way, this is maybe one of the reasons for the discrete and lasting appeal which this religion has been exerting in Brazilian religious life for over one hundred years.<sup>3</sup>

The origin of the Spiritist doctrine is the "encoding" developed by Allan Kardec in the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>4</sup>. This doctrine soon arrived in Brazil and was welcomed by sectors of the educated middle class in the main Brazilian cities. Due to his commitment to progress and to the concept of truths only partially or gradually revealed through mediumship, Spiritism is naturally perceived as an open doctrine. Pressure from the Brazilian socio-cultural environment was placed upon this intrinsic doctrinal characteristic, which was and continues to be the source of ongoing transformation, tension and disagreement within the dynamics of the Spiritist movement. The encoding, however, acts as a type of centripetal force, searching for the internal coherence of this set of beliefs.

Spiritist cosmology adapts and re-elaborates different concepts and values deriving from diverse sources in grand *bricoleur* style (Lévi-Strauss 1970). Its backdrop is the great Christian religious tradition and Spiritism recognizes in Jesus Christ a superior Spirit on a redeeming mission on earth. Concepts such as *evolution* and *progress*, which were dear to scientific knowledge at the time, were added to this tradition, as well as critical elements taken from Hinduism and Buddhism, such as *karma* and *reincarnation*. These additions, both extremely elaborate and full of potential unfoldings, effectively created a new scope of meaning. The concept of reincarnation, in particular, dialogues, distorts and modifies the Christian idea of eternal life. In turn, it implies the concept of *mediumship*, because as an incarnate spirit, a human being is always a medium, a channel of permanent contact between diverse worlds. This set of views outlines a fertile symbolic horizon, where particular concepts of life and death, and body and soul are at stake, which in the Spiritist perspective, make up the human person.

In Brazil, the relevance of this notion, as well as that of *mediumship*, brought Spiritism close to the Afro-Brazilian symbolic world<sup>5</sup>. In a rather unexpected way, the concept of *reincarnation* also brought this religious system closer to the values and characteristic beliefs of the vast Catholic world<sup>6</sup>.

In a suggestive article, Velho (1974) highlighted the relevance of the belief in spirits as a type of *lingua franca* in Brazilian culture. In such a cognitive and affective universe, as this author observed, individuation processes can assume very complex forms, intermediated by experiences with spirits. Hence, when analyzing the processes of social construction of reality, we must take into consideration the meanings of these experiences and the individuals and groups that take part in them (Velho op.cit.:56/60). So, in Spiritism, the emphasis put on the relational nature of identity processes – an incarnate spirit always exists in relation to many other incarnate and disincarnate spirits – coexists with relevant individuation factors – an incarnate spirit is responsible for its acts and conduct. Therefore, understanding the nature of the dynamics that link the living and the dead in Spiritism, also means probing into the role played by individuation processes in this religion, that is, the constitution of a person as the subject of his/her life.

After all, we are dealing with a middle class urban religion which appeared in modern times, where reading and writing play a central role in the social experience of its followers<sup>7</sup>. A religion which since its historical origin has hardly regarded itself as religion, but as a “rational” account of irrefutable evidence on the existence of spirits and their interaction with the "visible world", emphasizing the exercise of "free will" as one of its central values.

The aforementioned leads us to a brief incursion into spiritist cosmology.

### III. The Visible World and the Invisible World

The spiritists see Spiritism not only as a "religion," but also as a "science" and a "philosophy". In anthropological reading, however, we are clearly dealing with a religious universe. Within this symbolic system, all meaning and sense attributed to the human world depends on the belief in the existence of a superior world – the "Invisible World", "eternal and pre-existing everything", which encompasses the whole universe and finally dissolves in the great undivided totality of Divinity, where everything heads for. This "Invisible World" – the “Spiritual Level”, as the spiritists who I met during the course of this research more commonly call it – encompasses life on our planet Earth – the "Visible World" (the "Material Level"). The entities or "spirits" wander from one world into the other.

The whole spiritist religious realm is based on the relationship between the two Worlds. On the one hand the "Invisible World" and the "Visible World" oppose each other, and on the other hand they complement each other, as the former transcends and gives meaning to the latter. The dynamics of this relationship stands on two logical-temporal axes, which structure the journey of the spirits between one world and the other.

The first one is the diachronic axle, the great cosmic path where everything unfolds under the eye of God, the only one capable of understanding the always final unity of every spiritual entity. Along this axle, the concepts of **reincarnation**, **karma** and **evolution** emerge. Everything here seems to operate in the direction of individuation, which should be understood as cosmic individuation. After all, we are dealing with the teleological route in which, confronted with matter (that is, a new body acquired after each new incarnation), a spiritual entity gradually develops its essential attributes: free will, intelligence and will.

The second one is the synchronous axle, where the relation between the two worlds is based on the perspective of the incarnate spirit, whose unity between body and soul is contingent on a unique incarnation. The central issue here is that of mediumship, that is, the different forms of spiritual communication between incarnate and disincarnate

spirits, as incarnate spirits communicate permanently (voluntarily or involuntarily) with disincarnate spirits. At the same time, if we consider the polarity incarnate life / disincarnate life, the first term –incarnate life – is clearly the most significant. Incarnate life is the field where a spiritual entity confronts “its” karma, it is **probation**, and as such, a decisive place in this cosmology. Despite the fact that according to Spiritism nothing happens at random, in the "Visible World" a true drama unfolds, necessarily experienced by each incarnate spirit: the confrontation between what we could call the incarnate spirit’s own free will and the will of others (the free will of disincarnate spirits). Mediumship and reincarnation determine each other, where the significance of human acts is necessarily dense. As there are spirits in all stages of evolution, it is worthy of note that a wandering spirit (that is, in the disincarnate state) is not necessarily superior to an incarnate spirit.

In Spiritism, reincarnation and mediumship shatter any idea of an eventual unity of the "self", however, there is an immediate proposal to complete such a unit. Reincarnation implies the idea of inherent incompleteness regarding any spiritual entity (by definition: in progress, on a long cosmic journey of successive incarnations). In addition, mediumship implies the intrinsically *fragmentary* nature of the incarnate spiritual entity (the human being here and now, who is in search of meaning.) Nothing in Spiritism appears to be identical to itself; any principle of identity is characterized by doubleness – another spirit, many other spirits, or even a same spirit which is, however, *diverse* from its incarnate identity. Therefore, as we will see, reincarnation in diachrony and mediumship in synchrony, both configure the complex spiritist concept of the person, i.e. that which a spiritist believes he/she is, i.e., him/herself<sup>8</sup>.

#### **IV. Death and eternity: reincarnation, karma and evolution.**

The Jewish-Christian God was the beginning of everything - the creator of the world from nothing. The opposition between spirit and matter, the first distinction, unfolds itself and establishes movement and the flow of the world as conceived by spiritists. Material beings inhabit the "Visible World", immaterial beings, the "Invisible World". At the diachronic level, the two worlds become related by alternation throughout a cosmic path teleologically geared towards the evolution of spiritual entities, which are the main divine creatures.

At the beginning of everything, the perfect God created an imperfect world (and the concept of imperfection implies not only the existence of material things, but also the inevitable existence of evil.) Intelligence, will and free will are the intrinsic latent attributes of spiritual entities, which are constantly being created. These attributes will have to develop in direct confrontation with matter, through a long-lasting series of incarnations. Therefore, all spiritual entities are equal in imperfection and incompleteness to begin with. The hierarchic differentiation among them – seen as essentially “fair” – will take shape depending on the performance of the spirits throughout their successive incarnations. The Earth is considered "an intermediate" planet in this great cosmic journey, where "places" in the universe are also ranked hierarchically.

The cosmic trajectory of each spirit becomes unique according to its performance in each incarnation. In this religious system, complete individuation is a cosmic arrival, an ideal meta-individuality that transcends human reality. Successive incarnations, direct contact with matter, own and alien corporeality, and most importantly the constant communication with disincarnate spirits, form a scenario of permanent confrontation

between free will and determinism, as we will see next. These two values, which are widely discussed in western philosophical tradition, gain peculiar contours in Spiritism. Throughout their long cosmic journey, the spirits differentiate themselves by means of successive incarnations, producing "merit" or "guilt" with their own acts. Karma or the "law of cosmic causation" is the scale where no significant fact from the moral point of view is overlooked. Hence, each spirit produces its own karma, and inexorably deals with it in each new incarnation. However, they all head in an evolutionary direction – a spirit never heads backwards (madness for example, would be a moment of suspension of karma and consequently of evolution, a "debt to be paid off".) Nevertheless, with each incarnation a spirit suffers a sort of "deletion" of its cosmic memory. So, each new incarnation preserves a space of decisive indetermination for the exercise of a relative free will, which defines the incarnate spirit/human being. "Not all problems are irremovable, nor everything is past", said my spiritist interlocutors throughout my research. If some problems are "karmic", the relative human free will is constantly affirmed through the ever-changing ways of dealing with those problems.

Reincarnation, ruled by karma and inexorably geared towards evolution, is thus tempered by the concept of a relative, yet effective free will. On its cosmic journey heading towards the level of Superior Spirit, the successive passages of a spirit between the two worlds correspond to different forms of confrontation between free will and determinism.

In Kardec's doctrine, when reaching the condition of superior spirit, which corresponds to the apex of the evolutionary scale, a spiritual entity achieves full individuality. Once there, freed from karma and the circle of reincarnations, and finally complete and one, the spirit dissolves in the heart of Divinity. Reincarnation stretches time immensely, but does not make it endless. Eternity itself, situated in a very distant eschatological future, remains far beyond reincarnation. Apparently, spiritist eternal life, situated *beyond* a finite stretch of time, corresponds to the end of a vast evolutionary trajectory, thus evoking Christian heaven.

However, as the degree of "superior" spirit itself is internally differentiated, and as the Earth itself is a planet of incarnation situated somewhere in the middle of the great cosmic evolutionary path, not only do the inferior spirits remain around us, but also the superior ones meet here, vibrating in subtle and more elevated energy bands, as they play an important role in the interaction with the world of the living. In Brazilian spiritist practice, as Stoll's (op.cit.) and Lewgoy's (op.cit.) analyses on medium Chico Xavier suggest, the concept of reincarnation has been intensely elaborated and filled with dense images and exemplary doctrinal narratives, which have brought Spiritism closer to the Brazilian Catholic world.

Jacques Le Goff, in his magnificent study on the birth of the Purgatory (1981:316), quotes Brandon<sup>9</sup>, according to whom the medieval Church invented Purgatory to fill the existing secular gap between the interests of the individual, with his/her limited cycle of biological life, and the trajectory of the human species as a whole. The comparison between the elaboration of the concept of reincarnation, undertaken by Spiritism in Brazil, and the Christian and later Catholic concept of Purgatory, such as exhaustingly examined by Le Goff (op. cit.), is suggestive and merits a brief examination<sup>10</sup>. Contrary to the dissolution of temporary human life into the timelessness of eternal life, everything within Brazilian Spiritism suggests the transformation of eternity into an intermediate time that stretches and prolongs finite time to the maximum, through a vast cycle of human incarnations. Similarly, the existence of different possible places for multiple incarnations implies a doctrinal opening for the possibility of an imaginary geography projected on the whole universe.

Le Goff (op. cit.) demonstrated how the secular construction of the belief in the Purgatory, which peaked between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in medieval Europe, implies and stimulates substantial modifications in the space-temporal frames of the Christian imaginary. The concept corresponds to a spacialization of thought and establishes an absolutely new temporality (a chronological and eschatological future), which spans from individual death to resurrection on Judgment Day. A new set of ideas, mirroring the profound changes undergone by society at the time, emerged with the concept of Purgatory. The possibility of mitigating postmortem punishments, thus stimulating examination of conscience while being alive, emphasizes the idea of individual responsibility. The emergence of correlated suffrages and action intercessions, simultaneously, set in motion an active solidarity between the deceased and the living. According to Le Goff (op. cit.: 482), after its origin and apogee, which were widely documented, the history of the belief in Purgatory stretched through the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Christian world, and later in Catholicism. It did so in such a way that "the system of solidarity between the living and the dead, by means of Purgatory, became a circular and endless chain, a chain of perfect reciprocity"<sup>11</sup>.

Historians believe that it is the Christian belief in immortality and the final resurrection, as well as the concept of perpetual life earned by means of one life alone that gave rise to the belief in Purgatory. Therefore, in their view, religions such as Hinduism and Catharism, which believe in perpetual reincarnations and in metempsychosis, excluded the belief in Purgatory beforehand (op.cit.: 15).

The comparison between contemporary Spiritist belief in reincarnation and Christian belief in Purgatory, as analyzed by Le Goff, is suggestive. Without intending to delve into the details of the history of the development of Catholicism in the country, in the Brazilian religious realm everything indicates that Spiritism promoted that which was unthinkable for Le Goff: the absorption and transformation of Catholic belief in Purgatory into ideas of reincarnation and karma. Let us see.

Stoll (op. cit.:105-106) tells us how the Book of Spirits already indicated the existence of "places" of rest and habitation for disincarnate spirits in the interval between two incarnations (wandering spirits, in Kardec's terminology.) However, the lack of elaboration in the encoding regarding conditions of life in this errant state, stands out. In Brazil, this doctrinal gap would have been widely filled in by the psychographed work of Chico Xavier, in which, according to the author, the vague concept of "wandering" would have been substituted for "a structured vision of Beyond."

With different narrative genres – novels, poems, stories, chronicles and letters – Chico Xavier made life after death the recurrent subject matter of his works (Lewgoy op.cit., and Stoll op.cit.) On the one hand, there are stories in which, by means of a medium, disincarnate spirits communicate with incarnate ones. The narratives of a disincarnate spirit are highlighted here, via a medium, and they witness and describe in a wealth of sensitive detail, the existence of a Beyond and a life after death, and affirm that death is an experience of passage. On the other hand, there is another type of account, where a disincarnate spirit tells, via a medium, of its many incarnate lives, full of historical details and doctrinal lessons<sup>12</sup>.

The effect of this vast doctrinal literature is comparable to that which Le Goff wrote on Purgatory. It places emphasis on the concept of personal responsibility, regarding the guilt/merit system<sup>13</sup>. It simultaneously promotes active solidarity between the dead and the living, the ones constantly interceding for the others<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the affective memory of a group is preserved through the constant revival of ties with the deceased, via mediumistic communication; Spiritism in our country seems to be an extremely

familiar and domestic religion, almost an intimate one<sup>15</sup>. Human time stretched in the Beyond up to the limits of eternity, human space also stretched, so as to expand human geography over the whole universe. "Our home", is the title significantly given to one of the most successful psychographed novels by Chico Xavier<sup>16</sup>.

## **V. Life: incarnation, concept of a person, mediumship**

What is a person then, from the viewpoint of the set of concepts that Spiritism proposes?

A human being is the union of: a body (the vital principle common to all living organisms); a spirit (the soul, immaterial and transcendent); a perispirit (a hybrid element composed of a mortal coarse part, and a subtle part, preserved by the spirit, which will couple with a new body in a new reincarnation). In the environments of both worlds, there is the universal fluid, also a hybrid element where the vibrations emitted by thoughts and emotions of incarnate and disincarnate spirits get imprinted. The perispirit and the universal fluid are the agents that enable the passage from one world to the other.

The aforementioned implies a radical rereading of the meaning of gestation, birth and death. These are preliminary and dangerous states, where the doors leading to the passage between the two worlds open up. Within the spiritist terminology and considering the cosmic path of a spiritual entity, these are complementary "disturbances". Upon incarnation, which is a sheer phase of cosmic spiritual life, the transcendent memory of the series of Incarnate and disincarnate "lives" of an entity would be deleted.

"Death" mutates into disincarnate "life", thus, Spiritism constructs a non-human point of view for its followers, into which one can mutate mentally: the view of disincarnate life upon incarnate life. This enables us to regard ourselves, i.e., as incarnate human beings/spirits, that is, the view of an entity which differs from us significantly. In this system of thought, no matter how attenuated the idea of death is, it still holds a relevant alterity: the dead individual is something other than the living. He/she is from *another* world, a world somehow similar to ours, however another world, as he/she tells us. An important vernacular distinction explains more accurately what is at stake. The Spiritist groups I researched call that transcendent spiritual entity the "higher self", which undergoes many reincarnations along its cosmic path. The "lower self" is the counterpart of the "higher self"; the former being the incarnate identity, so to say, that the transcendent spiritual entity adopts during a single incarnation. This transcendent memory, much longer than the one a spirit may have during a single reincarnation, will however emerge along the incarnate life in the form of the "unconscious" or "intuition", by chance manifesting itself in dreams or in different mediumistic experiences. The complexity of the idea of mediumship in Spiritism is remarkable, not only does it correlate an incarnate spirit with other disincarnate spirits, but also an incarnate spirit with his/her own "higher self".<sup>17</sup>

Spiritism proposes an intricate set of perspectives of the "self" to its followers. This permanent exchange of complementary viewpoints which defines the human person gives this religion remarkable wealth of imagination, which is, among other things, the reason for the extraordinary blossom of spiritist fictional literature in Brazil<sup>18</sup>.

This "forgetfulness of the past", such "deletion of memory", which defines the complementary nature of the relation between the "lower self" and *its* "higher self", illuminates a crucial issue within this symbolic system: the dramatic renovation and actualization of the incarnate spirit's free-will.

Upon each incarnation, once a “new” body is gained, each spirit confronts its karma, forgetting what he/she exactly consists of. Incarnate life is therefore “probation”. The comprehension of death as “disincarnation” enables Spiritism to preserve the active dimension of incarnate life. It also allows for the ingenious attenuation of the alterity of death: the dead permanently communicate with us.

Spiritism grades and softens the otherness of death. The matter is not one of a radical non-being, rather, it is a peculiar and imaginative way of being. Because, once the phase of “disturbance” that follows disincarnation is overcome, a now wandering spirit recovers its transcendent memory and carries on with his/her active and affective life; communication with the living is just a part of the spirit’s life. In turn, once the taboo phase is surpassed (in which the incarnate spirits intimate with the dead must accept this separation and control themselves not to further disturb the discarnate spirit, who is already naturally disturbed by such a radical change of state), the incarnate spirits/human beings, can communicate again with the dead/disincarnate spirit.

Due to mediumship, the society “Beyond the tomb” and the earthly society effectively integrate as a single and compact society. Incarnate or disincarnate spirits permanently communicate with each other. By means of spiritual communication, both worlds integrate in an interactive network. As every human being is an incarnate spirit, mediumship would be an “organic innate gift”.

In a nutshell, spiritual communication occurs as follows: a new human being is formed by coupling a wandering spirit with a new body through the perispírit. In his/her routine, when thinking, feeling, expressing him/herself, this incarnate spirit emits vibrations, which by imprinting a particular frequency in the universal fluid reach a certain “vibratory band”. Such “vibratory bands” superimpose each other vertically in space from the “lowest” to the “highest”, from the most “inferior” to the most “elevated”. Many spirits that vibrate similarly, incarnate or disincarnate, connect with each other within the same vibratory band. This is why discarnate spirits exert a subtle, permanent and inevitable influence on us. However, it is the incarnate spirit him/herself which vibrates – “giving an opening”, as spiritists say – and is primarily responsible for the “quality” of the vibrations emitted by his/her thoughts and emotions, and hence, for the contact with a vibratory band bearing a certain moral quality.

Such bands tune the incarnate spirit with other spirits in different evolutionary degrees. If vibrations are good and “elevated”, we will connect to superior spirits and such a positive tuning is a measure of respect for the incarnate spirit’s free-will. If we usually vibrate in “low” bands, everything will become terribly problematic, because once in contact with inferior spirits, we run the grave risk of losing our relative and precarious free-will. The phenomenon of obsession clearly reveals the difficult impasses that the relation between the living and the dead, that is, the incarnate and disincarnate spirits, might bring about, according to spiritist view.

## **VI. Obsession: alterity between the living and the dead**

Obsession, which can be weak or strong, may end up annihilating human free will, when the overtaking of an incarnate spirit by a discarnate spirit takes place. Such a phenomenon belongs to the diffuse spiritual communication processes, which permeate daily life, as conceived by spiritists.

Therefore, obsession is an extra-ritual phenomenon, that is, it takes place in normal life, outside the spiritist ritual system. Disincarnate and incarnate spirits communicate with

each other day-by-day. The spiritist ritual system, through study, charity and mediumship, attempts to regulate and control this constant exchange between the Invisible World and the Visible World, so that the subtle, however critical border between them does not dissolve in mischievous and chaotic ways of communication. Within the ritual setting, the term mediumship must be understood as a more restricted concept. It actually refers to **spiritist communication**. One way or another, the notion of mediumship questions human incompleteness, and spiritist practice offers followers mechanisms to reflect upon how to complete the identity of the “self” in relation to the spirits. This is a dynamic and never-ending process.

Hence, obsession is the paradigm of negative mediumship. It consists of a braking up of the incarnation unit spirit + body. In such cases, individuals have their spirits annihilated and the body subjected to the will of a disincarnate spirit. A specific spiritist ritual – “disobsession” - deals with this mischievous phenomenon.

By focusing on the disincarnate obsessor spirit rather than on the obsessed concrete individual, this ritual promotes a curious symbolic displacement from the visible world to the invisible world. Such a displacement makes us reflect upon the acceptance of this displaced death, as spiritists see it, which is mainly a spirit losing the body of his/her last reincarnation. It is an attenuated loss (as the spirit remains), however a loss (of the body); a relative separation (spirits keep communicating), however a separation indeed (leaving the world of the living and passing over to the world of the dead). The living must accept this loss, primarily to help the dead accept their condition and difference.

When a spirit becomes disincarnate, his/her friends and relatives must accept this fact. Otherwise, they will greatly disturb the disincarnate spirit in the critical phase of disturbance, which corresponds to the loss of the “physical body” and recovering the “Higher self”, as the memory of his/her previous lives returns. If the living accept the death of the beloved, they will help him/her greatly during this dramatic moment by preventing the disincarnate spirit from rejecting his/her own death and thus attempting to couple an alien body, thus becoming a potential obsessor. , In time, the spiritist ritual system makes him/her present by means of psychography, dreams, visions and many other manifestations.

The disobsession ritual enacts the dramatic situation experienced by a disincarnate spirit, who does not accept his/her own death/disincarnation and therefore obsesses a living individual with the ultimate desire of substituting the body he/she does not accept to have lost for somebody else’s body. Thus, disobsession may be understood as the ritualization of a critical problem within this system of beliefs; an exemplary and didactic narration about the alterity between the living and the dead, as conceived by Spiritism. If the Beyond is always present and close to us, every dead person is a potential threat implying the break up of the precarious unit of the living and the chaotic disorganization of the Divine order of the cosmos, which must advance forward, towards the future, and never backwards towards the past. In the same way as body and soul must preserve their ephemeral link, more decisively, past and future must keep their respective places, the communication between the two worlds must not violate basic distinctions. Communication balance between both worlds requires the constant reaffirmation of the basic distinctions between them. Dead is dead; living is living. A dead person can not desire to couple with the body of a living person; the dead will only obtain a new body through a new reincarnation. And in order for that to happen, the dead need to come to terms with their own Karma.

In a disobsession ritual, assuming the role of the obsessed living person, and generally in his/her absence, the spiritist mediums hold this spiritual fight, which was originally lost<sup>19</sup>. In the “invisible world” the superior spirits, wardens of the mediums and of the spiritist center, bring the lower obsessor spirits to the center, against their will. On the side of the “Visible World”, as well as the “sustaining mediums”, who pray and emit positive vibrations to ensure a positive environment for the session, the symbolic central unit is the pair indoctrinator medium (identified with the superior spirits) and the psychophonic medium (identified with the obsessed living person, who has lent his/her body to the inferior obsessor spirit). The whole battle will be fought verbally in a dialogue between the obsessor spirit, incorporated by the psychophonic medium, and the indoctrinator, who is in contact with the superior spirits. Ideally the indoctrinator will lead the obsessor to the cosmic moment of full regret and assumption of the blame derived from his/her last incarnation. The assumption of his/her own blame, which coincides with the acceptance of his/her own death in a variation of the idea of conscience examination, is the fundamental condition to reacquire the free will and fuller memory that characterize the wandering spirit. As a “higher self”, in a critical moment while exercising his/her fullest free-will, which corresponds to the memory of all his/her reincarnations and intermediary “lives”, the “dead” will accept reincarnation and submit to a new **probation**. The cycle of reincarnations will now be re-established and the obsessed living person will be left alone in peace, but he/she, in turn, will have to strengthen his/her own precarious free will through spiritist practice.

Rationalist and extremely verbal, this system of beliefs stresses human incompleteness to immediately fulfill it through the complex life of spirits. Such a movement permanently opens up to a never-ending number of new questions that must be eagerly answered, which will once more trigger new questions and new answers.

Death becomes a sort of life, a semi-death or a semi-life, as the disincarnate spirit remains active in the society of the living, as long as all sides involved accept the fundamental but tenuous passage that is “physical death”. As long as they also accept the idea of confronting the consequences of their own actions in a new incarnation, and thus evolve, always broadening the free will until final dissolution is attained. Within that period, Spiritism extends human time until the limits of eternity and extends human space as far as the borders of the universe. Its symbolization processes spread about such idealized temporal infinity and spacial vastness. Eternal life becomes some sort of here and now.

And how about life itself? Life is a problematic place, where all we have is a “lower self”, who not knowing where exactly his/her free will starts or finishes, i.e., his/her own “self”, must deal with those circumstances in the best possible way, in the midst of inevitable uncertainty, while trying to compensate for the incomplete self through the spirits.

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 behavior, 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.

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### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This text was originally presented in the Seminar “Life and Death in Religious Traditions”, Unilasalle. Niterói, November 6, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> This topic is too vast to be discussed hereby. About religion and the cult of the dead in ancient Rome, see the classic text by Fustel de Coulanges 1975. On the topic of death, see Áries 1977 and Rodrigues 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding a historical analysis of the development of Spiritism in Brazil, see Damazio 1994 and Giumbelli 1997.

<sup>4</sup> The ‘encoding’ is a set of five works – The Book of Spirits, The Book of Mediums, The Evangel according to Spiritism, Heaven and Hell, The Genesis: Miracles and Foretelling according to Spiritism – whose doctrinarian content was revealed to Allan Kardec by superior spirits. For a brief analysis of the literary and intellectual context of the emergence of Kardecist Spiritism in France, see: Stoll 2003.

<sup>5</sup> This question, as already mentioned in the introductory note, was a recurrent issue in the available literature on the subject in the 80’s. It is worth remarking that the spiritists also strongly debated their relation with Afro-Brazilian religions. On Umdanda, see Maggie 2001, Birman 1995, and Contins 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Recent bibliography, particularly Stoll 2003 and Lewgoy 2004, introduced important contributions in this sense. See the introductory note.

<sup>7</sup> To discuss charity, study and mediumship as complementary aspects of the Spiritist ritual system, see Cavalcanti 1983. On the role of writing in Spiritism, see Lewgoy 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Bibliography on the concept of person as an issue is vast and productive. Due to the discussion on the many possible concepts and definitions of human being in different cultures, the concept of person (Mauss 2003) is a fundamental comparative tool. Hence, the modern western view of the individual as the minimum unit of social life and the center of mortality and values, is a historic production, which has been masterly analyzed by Louis Dumont op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> The quoted work by Le Goff bears the title “Man and his destiny in the great religions”. Manchester University Press, 1962.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful for the fertile suggestion by Marcos Veneu. However, he is not responsible for the unfoldings here introduced.

<sup>11</sup> Free translation. “Le système de la solidarité entre les vivants et les morts, à travers le Purgatoire est devenu une chaîne circulaire sans fin, um courant de reciprocité parfaite” (Le Goff: op. cit.: 482).

12 The psychographed works by Chico Xavier explored a multiplicity of viewpoints which correspond to different author profiles of several spiritual entities. Stoll (op.cit.: cap. 3) outlines the different narrative genres in Xavier's "literary route". Lewgoy, who analyzed the outstanding place that writing and reading occupy in this system of beliefs, tells us that until his passing away, in July, 2002, Chico Xavier had published 412 psychographed books, a feat that makes him "one of the most prolific authors in the Portuguese language" (2004:28).

13 According to Xavier (apud Stoll, op. cit.:115) the "customs of eternity" which sit at the end of multiple reincarnations, will be passed through by every spirit "with the exclusive baggage that they have sown"

14 In his work, Lewgoy 2004, emphasizes the fact that Xavier brought Spiritism closer to the Catholic universe of mediations and intersections, especially in popular Catholicism.

15 In this regard, see the idea of "familiarity" of the Catholic heaven, elaborated by Thimoteo, 2002, in the analyses of obituaries in the works of Tristão de Athaide.

16 According to Lewgoy, this novel psychographed by Chico Xavier, whose spiritual author would be André Luiz, is a "turning point in the history of Brazilian Spiritism" (Lewgoy 2004:96). This book "(...) actualizes a sort of spiritist Utopia concerning a highly structured, integrated and fraternal communitarian organization", (op.cit.:98). According to Stoll, this novel reached its 40<sup>th</sup> edition in 1992 (Stoll op. cit.:106), and he remarks that each edition comprised between five to fifteen thousand copies. (op. cit. : 79).

17 This is the basis for a sort of "doubt" system inherent to the development of mediumship in Spiritism, in which fraud is a mere possibility. (Cavalcanti, op. cit.:118 and following pages).

18 As stated in the previously quoted works by Lewgoy and Stoll. As part of the successful Spiritist publishing venture, an author can express himself from multiple narrative viewpoints. The author may write as a "lower self", 'psychographing' the lives of other spirits, or as a "lower self" who having contacted his/her own "higher self" in dreams or other mediumistic experiences, can now narrate facts and episodes of his/her passed lives. Chico Xavier exemplarily explored these possibilities of the spiritist *person*. There is still the possibility of a production that defines the social situation of a "spiritist intellectual" as such. Associated to the ritual trend of studies, in this narrative genre the author expresses himself from his incarnate identity, as a "lower self" who explores an issue from the spiritist perspective (Cavalcanti 1983: 75-77).

19 Regarding the ethnography and analysis of a session, see Cavalcanti, op. cit.:123 and following pages.

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