




Beyond therapy and religion: a relational approach to the spiritual construction of wellbeing

Más allá de la terapia y la religión: una aproximación relacional a la construcción espiritual del bienestar

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ABSTRACT Taking into account the discontinuity between the body and the soul as a manifestation of the dominant “great division” of modernity, this paper intends to reflect critically on the scope of this division in the analysis of the therapeutic dimension of New Age style spirituality. Through participant observation, open-ended interviews and shared experiences with members of a spiritual movement of Indian origin, The Art of Living, carried out between 2012 and 2017 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, we describe two processes. First, the institutional discourse of the movement and its location within public disputes regarding the tension between the therapeutic and the religious. Second, we analyze regimens of everyday relationships that produce multiple agencies and a spiritual grammar. We then suggest the importance of attending to a relational and assembled framework that challenges the more conventional dualism between the therapeutic/religious in the light of a more general contemporary process of ordinarization in the management of well-being.

KEY WORDS Spirituality; Religion; Therapeutics; Argentina.

RESUMEN Teniendo en cuenta la discontinuidad entre lo corporal y lo anímico como una manifestación de la “gran división” moderna dominante, este trabajo se propone reflexionar críticamente sobre los alcances de esa división en el análisis de la dimensión terapéutica de la espiritualidad estilo Nueva Era. A partir de observación participante, entrevistas abiertas y convivencia con participantes del movimiento de espiritualidad de origen indio El Arte de Vivir, realizadas entre 2012 a 2017 en Buenos Aires, Argentina, se describen dos procesos. En primer lugar, el discurso institucional del movimiento y su localización en un régimen de disputas públicas en tensión entre lo terapéutico y lo religioso. En segundo lugar, analizamos un régimen de relaciones cotidiano que produce agenciamientos múltiples y una gramática espiritual. Mostramos entonces la importancia de atender una trama relacional y ensamblada que desafía el dualismo más convencional entre lo terapéutico/religioso a la luz de un proceso de ordinarización más general de la gestión contemporánea del bienestar.

PALABRAS CLAVES Espiritualidad; Religión; Terapéutica; Argentina, El Arte de Vivir.

INTRODUCTION

The emphasis that certain practices, currently known as religious, put on the construction of the well-being is nothing new. This articulation has a complex history in western societies, both in its subordinated areas, where the distance between such terms seems to have been slightly less problematic, and in its dominant spaces. Be that as it may, it is publicly accepted that the secularization processes have caused significant transformations in said relationship, by promoting – with different levels of success and intensity – a differentiation between the soul, managed by various religious expressions, and the body, managed by knowledge and medical practices.

What belongs to the order of the body and what to the order of the spirit? How was this boundary defined and stabilized? We seek to bring these issues toward a specific outline: the so-called “contemporary spirituality,” which emphasizes intimist and relational work over personal comfort and which challenges the boundaries between medicine, psychology, and religion.

Our aim is to ask ourselves about what happens to some participants that belong to a spiritual movement of Indian origin, which has a solid relationship with New Age style sensitivities, called The Art of Living (TAOL). The purpose of this paper is to analyze their interactions between such movement and other practices considered as “therapeutic” to show the existence of a common circuit protected by governing principles, such as well-being, balance, and a special bond with energy.

We believe that looking into this dimension could help to bring together the experiences and mediations that people weave in their day-to-day lives and to see how specific ways of thinking and living one’s own spiritual disciplines, ways that cannot be reduced to the universalist perspective of strategic action and struggle for a stance, are built from them. This prompts us to favor the practical contexts of production of spirituality as a process that cannot be exclusively related

to a specific systematic cosmology, a technology, knowledge or group, nor to an individual experience, but to multiple spaces and resources that can be complementary, combined with each other, and that can be renegotiated as well.

After rebuilding some focal points of the contemporary debate on spirituality, we focus on the institutional discourse of the movement and its localization within a public dispute system in which there is tension between the therapeutic and the religious. Finally, we analyze a system of everyday relationships that produce multiple agencies and an alternative grammar in a network broader than its institutional logic and its public intervention on well-being. The way we see it, such articulation could be thought of in a broader everydayness process regarding knowledge, techniques and practices that entail a hybridization of boundaries, that might have never been stable to begin with, between body and soul. A process that, against the idea of a constant risk society, some analysts have called a multiple solution society or “technical democracy.”⁽¹⁾

The art of living: therapy or religion?

In the early 1980s, Indian guru Ravi Shankar created in California The Art of Living Foundation. This foundation offers a copious number of seminars, breathing, meditation, and natural food workshops. Heir to the spiritual transnationalization movements that emerged after the Indian decolonization, the movement led by Ravi Shankar reinvents a series of traditional Hindu notions and practices aimed at personal well-being and social transformation, customized for a western audience.^(2,3) The Art of Living Foundation’s ideology promotes life change, an experience of personal comfort and a practice that is aimed to achieve “happiness here and now.” In this respect, the movement led by Ravi Shankar spreads a message of peace and social transformation on a global scale, backed by a strong emphasis on personal balance between the spiritual and the mundane that,

even when it can be identified with a western and globalized version of the Hindu tradition, it can also be identified within modern spirituality, as the case may be, based on its presence in the wide New Age sensitivity or in the “alternative” therapeutic resources.

The public presence of the Foundation in Argentina has come to the attention of some researchers. Some papers have specifically focused on its therapeutic aspects. For example, Funes⁽⁴⁾ analyzes stress category and management as a central category of his conceptions of well-being and malaise, and D’Angelo has described the location of its body techniques.⁽⁵⁾ Other papers took on the articulations with other fields that go beyond the movement itself, particularly those that are related to business and political life. Vargas and Viotti⁽⁶⁾ analyze some of its practices in massive events and its synchronicity with business discourse regarding entrepreneurship; Viotti⁽⁷⁾ analyzed its media resonance and its insertion in Catholic-secular discourse that prevails in Argentine public spaces in terms of its presence in a culturally legitimate and socially dominating area; and Viotti and Funes⁽⁸⁾ focused on some relations between institutional political life and its own ways of understanding personal, social, and cosmic transformation. However, except for D’Angelo’s analysis regarding the relation with the psychological field,⁽⁹⁾ little has been said about what the movement shares with other therapeutic practices, particularly with the perspective of the so-called “alternative therapies.”

We assume that experiences such as The Art of Living Foundation have altered the recent ways of understanding the limits between the religious and the therapeutic in “central” areas of Argentine society. Said process occurs in a broader context of diffusion of spirituality on a massive scale, with presence in work, economics, pedagogy, and aesthetics, that goes beyond the “alternative” structuring with which it was characterized during the 1980s in Latin América.⁽¹⁰⁾ This process, far from being homogeneous, acquires regional and national nuances and peculiarities, as well as in terms of social, ethnic, and gender groups. In

Argentina, this movement has been gaining great public visibility and capilar deployment in several social spaces. Mainly, but not exclusively, in the urban world and in the cultural sensitivity of its middle-classes, conventionally identified as medicalized, psychoanalyzed, or close to secularized religiousness.

If until recently it was possible to ignore the implication of religiousness in well-being, particularly based on a restrictive idea of religion as a synonym of an ecclesiastical institution somewhat divorced from experienced religiousness, we are forced to constantly rethink these boundaries. There is still some indagation to be done if, until recently, said boundaries were actually more stable or if they were the result of our analytical tools coated with a schedule and categories insensitive to everyday language and the assembling process of social life. Be as it may, since spirituality’s increasing public presence, particularly in its New Age style, but also in its more conventional Christian versions such as Catholic charismatism or Protestant pentecostalism, we find that the arguments that promote closeness and balance between intimate and public, discursive and material, body and soul, between human life and environmental setting, even often resorting to non-human forces, are rampant. Such public presence involves various fields: urban space, media, schools, businesses, disciplinary institutions, and hospitals. It appears that the language of “holism” threatens to become a current era code.

How to account for this process without reinforcing a boundary inherent to our analysis? It becomes relevant to reflect on just how much our categories are the legacy of a process of “great division” between body and soul set in a broader structuring between the universal and the given, contrary to what is singular and what is built-up that reverberates within modern tensions between nature/culture or social/individual.^(11,12,13)

Beyond the social efficiency of such separation in social life, the problem remains for as long as a “disproportion of comparative advantages,” which we analytically use as anthropologists, sociologists or historians,

exists. As Stolze Lima and Goldman⁽¹¹⁾ point out, this is one of the challenges of comparisons to the extent that such exercise usually implies decontextualized narrowings that are often considered as contrast units from different levels.

For example, when contrasting data resulting from a well localized description of daily contact with opinions or positions arising out of mass media or public normative interventions discourse, be it oral or written, there is the risk of believing these are different phenomena and not two sides of the same coin. This could entail the belief that, for example, the boundary between secular and sacred is strict in “institutional” religiousness and weaker in the “non-institutional” ones; or even that there is a difference between “spiritual or religious groups” and “alternative therapeutic networks,” when the difference is actually about the emphasis and not about the process itself. So, this would lead us to think that the flexibility of boundaries between the sacred and the secular and the relational network between people, things and non-natural forces is a matter of perspective and not of a process itself. We believe that maybe an adjustment to this kind of point of view may even help us make better comparisons.

Spirituality: a view from everyday life

In recent years, studies regarding modern spirituality have shown great heterogeneity. If we were to classify them in different approaches, we could distinguish at least three trends.

The first group contemplates a relatively general sociological and historical description, included in the modern narrative of individualization entailing a loss of the heteronormative scope of religion and the appearance – via spiritual movements – of an independent or individualist model.^(14,15,16) Although these papers have the merit of a long-term reading, they have remained at a very ideational level, and, as a consequence, they constantly and excessively focus on the tension between a cohesive order, characteristic of ecclesiastical religiousness, and

a notion of individualism, characteristic of spirituality, that would require infrasocial subjectivity. This kind of analysis presents some difficulties in detecting the capilarity of self-perceived experiences as spiritual ones in several areas and particularly to understand its presence and contemporary public diffusion.

The second group has developed a critical analysis to those pioneering papers, showing how the main point of everyday life allows for the reconstruction of social relationships and the objection to the excessive emphasis that such papers put on individual independence. In this regard, Wood⁽¹⁷⁾ and Wood and Bunn⁽¹⁸⁾ are concerned with the issue of authority, from a reinterpretation of the social practice theory by authors such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. These authors point out the need of reconsidering the dichotomy between individual independence and external authority and highlight the fact that there are several authorities in New Age style spiritual practices such as leaders, specialists, and non-natural forces, which affect groups and individuals in deep ways and with a great level of stability. In addition, they show how such practices and multiple authorities relate with processes of production and reproduction of social classes, especially of those groups identified as middle-class sectors. The aforementioned authors prioritize everyday networks and practices, describing relational fabrics with their social and cosmological productivity, in a movement that explains some dualisms inherent to the sociology of modern religiousness: social/individual, sacred/profane and body/soul.

Lastly, from a more radically pragmatic point of view, Bender and McRoberts⁽¹⁹⁾ have insisted on a similar analysis to the more classical studies that regard spirituality as a phenomenon separated from religion and exclusively distinguished by individualization and privatization. Conversely, said authors show to what extent spirituality has a historical genesis and a strong relational dimension – not just focusing on “internality” – and in what way it is a performative resource with public consequences. The latter is fundamental

because, against the religious idea of privatization, it shows how spirituality mobilizes various public actions and political affiliations in modern societies together with new ways of mediation that entail the use of mass media and cultural industry resources.

These papers on contemporary spirituality are a useful resource in order to reconsider the distinctions between the strictly religious and the therapeutic, as long as they partially sidestep the stricter differences between independent areas or fields, or even its modern redefinition, to focus on everyday life. In addition, they decenter the focus of specialists and public interventions and grant a new epistemological structuring to the more “trivial” or “impure” spaces. Lastly, they also allow for the suspension of more conventional narrowings between religious groups or therapies, as if they were a reality on their own.

In Latin America, this new movement has its own developments, which would take too long to reconstruct here. At least in Argentina, the analysis of what we have called and analytically narrowed as spiritual well-being has been discussed in a series of papers and considerations that have increased in the last decades, hand in hand with an issue that has gained increasing public visibility. Although the institutional logic has been prioritized, both the papers concerned with religious and/or spiritual movements and those concerned with religious and/or spiritual groups show a tendency to articulation. (4,5,9,20) Said papers have addressed the issue of articulation between the medical-psychological and the spiritual, and have had a particular development especially under the concept of “alternative therapies.” Both from the perspective of the construction as well as from the negotiation of professional identities of medicine and psychology⁽²¹⁾ and from the broader perspective of specialists and frequenters of “alternative” practices, such as reflexology, yoga, and ayurvedic medicine, which suggest different degrees of articulation with some non-naturalistic principles in the horizon of a “therapeutic pluralism” distinguished by the “choice” between various options^(9,22,23,24,25).

If from one perspective this separation can be socially efficient, then from another perspective it does not bear substantial relevance. Partly, the language we use is what gets caught in the tension between the religious-spiritual and the medical-therapeutic elements. And, as we all know of its performative ability, it narrows our subject of study, topics, and issues in a particular way. With this in mind, I have pointed out three main points of separation that can be reconsidered by analyzing everyday life and the various multiple agencies of spiritual well-being.

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First, the narrowing we carried out between “alternative therapies” and “spiritual or religious groups.” While the former is prone to a dialogue in view of health studies available, the latter is included in the social sciences of religion. María Julia Carozzi’s⁽²⁶⁾ paper, from the very title that warns about the possibility to read such processes in their simultaneity and the description of the network as morphological logic while indicating some core principles such as cosmization, autonomy, and dehierarchization, makes sure not to split these areas into independent spheres; and, although some of its principles or morphology were not useful for every individual case – particularly when the main focus was on public discourse and the totalizing principles of spiritual or therapeutic groups – we believe that its description is still useful at the moment of prioritizing frequenters’ everyday order and experience.

Specifically, when we analyze public discourse and practices, there arises a second point of distance. Particularly, when the

spotlight is on specialists and specific groups interventions, we analysts are prone to focus on the means for legitimization, differentiation, heterodoxy, and/or resistance, because in many cases this is what comes up in interactions with their leaders, guides or experts. Thereby, the articulation between those terms appears as a “hybrid,” under the terms described by Bruno Latour,⁽¹²⁾ as a combination of two elements which are stated separately, but live as one. Additionally, on that basis, we typically access to systematized and relatively coherent perspectives and believe we can perceive some kind of system with organized principles, values, and practices as if they were exclusive to the groups under analysis and not part of a grammar built in a more ample process.

Thirdly, and lastly, even when focusing on less public discourse, particularly when assuming an individual subject as a valid interlocutor and single locus of the interaction, we tend to reconstruct its “representations” and history (therapeutic and/or religious-spiritual) in isolation, assuming a notion of a person that appears as universal but somewhat resembles the modern individualism model, which entails an agent who “selects” and “chooses” in a salvation or well-being goods market or “multiple” scenario. The spotlight on individual choice runs the risk of assuming the person has a strictly individualistic notion, without looking into the way of subjectivity occurring there and that we believe presents differentiated elements from the classic model of the individual.⁽²⁷⁾ Most of social sciences bibliography has focused on the image of the “seeker,” assuming a type of person too close to modern individualism, in many instances eradicating the social fabrics resulting from said “choices” or the very theories that such agents have about themselves, which, mostly, do not match an agent who acts so freely in the world. Such approach is often underestimated by the very own nature of our theoretical-methodological perspectives such as, for example, the exclusive use of in-depth interview which can unilaterally focus on the “individual experience.”⁽⁸⁾

Going back to some of the considerations of a relational approach of what subjectivity does in modern spirituality, we are trying to establish that an overview on everyday life, that responsibly adopts some aspects lived as real by its frequenters, can help us rebuild a rather more complex chart regarding this process. In a way, our interest is to restore the relational analysis described by the first papers that, in the region, described the New Age and alternative therapies as part of the same network, and expand it beyond toward a broader fabric that can incorporate everyday life and the practices and knowledges that produce subjectivity.

We understand spirituality not as an evidently novel category, but as a category that has gained a renewed presence in contemporary times, which exists as a practice, that is, it exists as long as there is action, with great capability of circulation and performativity in the most diverse fields.^(19,28,29) Parallely, we understand that this pragmatics of spirituality is a heterogeneous grammar, neither endless or lacking specificity, that includes a non-naturalistic notion of cause and efficiency, a relational cosmological order and work on oneself, and is expressed in varying degrees of intensity based on material and discursive mediators of different descent: multiple esoterisms with a strong presence during the 20th century, self-help culture and subjectivity technologies of eastern origin, even some Amerindian practices, adjusted to everyday life of urban groups of modern Euro-American societies.^(30,31)

From the point of view of everyday circulation of these practices and knowledge, it is possible that the tension between the therapeutic and the religious/spiritual, and even their disputes for legitimacy in a field or the systemic perspectives that emerge when the spotlight is on public discourse, may take a different shade. Not only is it much harder to narrow the independent spheres of therapeutics and spirituality, but also spirituality itself is a fabric of circuits, of differentiated directions and practices. As we will see, even when the public discourse insists on physical, medical, and even psychological advantages of meditation,

overstating its function to well-being understood as a biological and psycho-emotional process, from everyday life, the reasons of said well-being exceed by far a biological and socio-psychological definition of subjectivity, incorporating a non-human dimension such as energy that entails a transforming vital force that can cause malaise when circulating wrongly and well-being when channeled and balanced.

For actors in action, everyday life and the complexity of what Law⁽¹³⁾ called “non-conventional forms” are processes of circulation and assemblage that can help us reconsider the different bridges and articulations between the medical-psychological world, alternative therapies and New Age spirituality. In this respect, we need to mention the importance of Law’s⁽¹³⁾ analysis on “assemblages” in religious contexts, where it is significant to present a realistic perspective enabling a broader reality for those who experience it and, in that process, to explore even the very notion of the person at stake. Such approach could also consider, in a critical way, the methodological individualist perspective that is focused on the users or frequenters of that kind of practices and their “therapeutic choices” or “spiritual choices” as different “fields” or “spheres” of action.

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

The material obtained comes from participant observation, open-ended interviews and shared experience with members of The Art of Living movement and, particularly, from the accompaniment of its followers beyond the activities of the movement itself, their relations with their personal environment, their perspectives and the mediation fabrics that shape their everyday lives. Moreover, a secondary database was created with press material from various media, in order to analyze the Foundation’s public interventions as well as the reactions of other social actors in this field.

The interviews and observation were carried out from 2012 to 2017, uninterruptedly, in different environments and contexts.

Every time, the purpose and scope of the investigation was made explicit, and, unless otherwise expressed, the anonymity of the speakers was ensured. The complete paper has thirty digitally recorded interviews with guides, mid-level professionals and, particularly, occasional participants of the activities offered by the Foundation. This paper also includes field records on conversations and informal oral exchanges, gathered in the field journal. Participant observation was carried out in different types of workshops and courses on specific weekdays at two of the Foundation’s facilities located at the neighborhoods of Colegiales and Villa Crespo of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires. Observation has also been made in various retreat facilities in Tigre, a town located in the province of Buenos Aires; in conferences held on specific issues or with special guests, international guides or Ravi Shankar himself; and in interventions or discussions in public spaces that the Foundation carries out in specific areas where it has influence (hospitals, prisons, public road). Lastly, I have taken part in almost every group meditation event carried out annually in the public squares of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires called “Argentina Medita” [Argentina Meditates], in which I have also conducted a survey to the event participants on their social profile, lifestyle and their spiritual, religious and therapeutic recurrences. Both the interviews as well as the field records of conversations or observations have been codified according to recurrent topics that came up during the investigation.

THE PUBLIC DISPUTE FOR HEALTH

Some of the public appearances of The Art of Living guides may give us an idea of how spirituality is based on scientific evidence which suggests that the cure can be measured in terms of “body” efficiency. Eugenio, one of the coordinators of the courses and workshops offered weekly by the Foundation,

mentioned in one of the introductory meetings the following:

Meditation improves cellular organization, as proved by several medical studies, it delays aging and improves life quality as it rejuvenates the cells. Beyond that, it's highly proven that those who meditate and have a healthy diet are less likely to get cancer and to have a stroke, as well as to get depressed or stressed. Breathing rises the oxygenation, thereby changing all body mechanisms, having consequences in people lives, their mood, and in the way they relate to others. There's a biological foundation in all this discipline. (Eugenio)

On countless occasions, during his visit to Argentina in 2012, Ravi Shankar himself expressed that breathing is a technique that helps in the elimination of stress and improves the quality of life, and that its efficiency as a complement to other medical and psychological techniques is “scientifically studied.” For example, in a public lecture given at the Sheraton Buenos Aires Hotel, surrounded by journalists and followers, he said that breathing techniques fostered by the Art of Living also help prevent the “mental diseases of our times, such as depression and anxiety”.

In another of his public appearances, he expressed that cancer may have biological causes, but it may also be related to food and lifestyle, and that meditation techniques and living a healthy life can help revert these processes. In an interview made in *Clarín* newspaper, entitled “The mind and breathing have a very important role in the healing of cancer,”⁽³²⁾ Shankar assured that:

Yes, we have carried out experiments in the last decades with thousands of people who have found the cure by means of their own breath. The mind and breath have a very important role in healing the body. If ill people don't rest, they won't heal, whether they're medicated or not. Our body has a natural ability of healing itself whenever it has properly rested,

and the mind may give said rest to the body.⁽³²⁾

Of course, there were several reactions to this in the media. In an article published in *Clarín* “All cancer treatment must have scientific support,”⁽³³⁾ an oncologist, vice president of the Asociación Argentina de Cancerología [Argentine Cancer Association], highlighted the lack of empirical evidence on “alternative therapies” curing cancer, which must be treated biologically. Spreading the idea that a wider reaction could not avoid mentioning the complementarity between such techniques and the benefit of dieting and meditation as an element which improves life quality:

There is the certainty that multidisciplinary treatment is the best way to deal with the disease. It must also be said that anything that allows for the improvement of life quality – such as a healthy diet, as well as mood-improving techniques – prevents the disease from accelerating. However, all these must be done under a scientifically-based context of assistance.⁽³³⁾

Interestingly, the guides of the movement and even some of the opposing physicians firmly believed that there exists a complementarity between both body and spiritual techniques. But what notion of spirituality are they based on? In those interventions, the therapeutic dimension of spirituality used to be kept within complementary criteria and within a line in which well-being and physical malaise causes are, primarily, natural, that is, related to body, physical and biological phenomena, and, secondly, psychosocial, that is, related to lifestyles and behavior that have to do with the care for oneself and their environment.

So, what did the instructor and Ravi Shankar mean with their statements? Can we assure that these ideas are the only ones circulating amongst guides and followers of The Art of Living Foundation? The notion that body-related issues can be measured and quantified in terms of efficiency

appears as a legitimating public discourse, in which spirituality is completely compatible with medical-psychological aspects. Such idea is largely used in public and in day-to-day speeches. As a follower of Shankar said in an informal conversation which I recorded in my field journal:

...this isn't magic, this is supported by physicians, by physicist studies which explain it in detail (and also added) the thing is that physicists and physicians are discovering other things too, there's more to it. (Informal field record)

It is our interest to do some research on that "something else" as long as, from a point of view less evident in public demonstrations, the well-being entails a more extensive aspect than that of the body.

The spiritual fabric and the naturalization of well-being

Some shared moments with Joaquín and Julia, two followers of the Art of Living in Buenos Aires, who define themselves as "spiritual people" or people "in search for spirituality," may help us focus on what we understand as plural participation in contemporary spirituality and as part of the well-being system which has different resources and technologies, which exceed a "group" or "therapy" and that make up a common discussion space not reducible to any of those terms.

Joaquín is an economist in his early forties who completed his undergraduate studies at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. I shared various activities with him inside and outside the Foundation. His personal identification with The Art of Living was intense and committed. Not only had he participated in several courses and started to train to become an instructor, but he also highly engaged in programs at the jail and in assistance programs to help the homeless. He lived this identification as a way among others. A place where he had found something that was present in many other "spiritual ways" and within

many other people he met, who had their own ways to what he considered to be the "same goal," that is, "personal growth," "discovering oneself," and to be "in balance."

Julia is in her early thirties, she studied psychology and she told me, on countless occasions, details about her non-practicing Jewish family, who she always felt very close to and to whom she wants to persuade of participating in the Art of Living. Although she always felt "far away from religion," she remarked that since she got involved in the foundation she learned to revalue many things of the "Jewish spirituality" which she had neglected, expressing, in detail, as Joaquín, that there exists only one spirituality and that every individual experiences it in unsuspected ways.

I met Joaquín and Julia at a course held at the foundation more than five years ago. In this introductory course, we learnt one of the most important techniques of the Art of Living. It was one of the first courses I attended, and they were both already involved in several of the foundation's activities. After some days of group shared yoga practices, meditation and after attending speeches on food and healthy life, it was time for the most desirable and final moment, the practice which is considered to be the most special moment of the courses: the *Sudarshan Kriya*.

The term can be translated as "proper vision of purification," a technique revealed to Ravi Shankar during the 1980s, in California, and which consists in intense hyperventilation exercises, accompanied with rhythmical arm movements and ends with body calmness which usually produces strong states of personal reactions, which could cause a person to cry or laugh, or even to experience visions or sensations of intense extasis. Short versions of that *Kriya* or "purification practice" are taught to the participants so that they can do them regularly at home and make up one of the cornerstones of well-being, which goes with a strict diet and water consumption in large quantities.

This is an important process in the social aspect of the Foundation and a landmark of the result which many occasional participants

feel as “transformative.” This technique is a process that has been analyzed in detail by other authors, such as D’Angelo,⁽⁵⁾ showing its somatic aspects.

This experience was central for both of them. Since then, both have been actively participating in groups and in the foundation. For Julia, it is a “*permanent work with oneself, a work of purification and balance.*” As for Joaquín, it is:

...the most important technique to learn about, it's the starting point of all that comes afterwards, since it causes such pleasure that you then want to go back to it all the time. It's a deep energy mobilization, feels as if you knew something about divinity. (Joaquín)

This technology combines breath, body movements, and meditation, but at the same time the mobilization of which, in practice, entails a “deep energetic mobilization.” The energetic mobilization is essential as long as it adds to the efficiency of the well-being that this technique provides to the initial students an extra human factor, acting as a force which must be discovered and managed by the newcomers of the courses, and later on by insiders. Besides, as Joaquín pointed out, such energy may be understood as *divinity*, by undoubtedly showing aspects of the ways in which, in the Art of Living, said experience is defined in a wider conception of non-human. Moreover, this resource produces a state of personal well-being or a “drunkenness” which many followers informally defined as to be *soaked in prana*, or releasing a lot of *prana*, which is one of the most frequently used ways to refer to the energy, broadly speaking.

Regarding this aspect of the *Kriyas* practice, related to diet and meditation, as a broader category and in its moral sense of service life, proposed by the Art of Living, there are two issues to take into account. In the first place, although the foundation public discourses insist on the “empirically proved” dimension and the “scientific evidence” of the benefits offered by these techniques for

health, those who use them go beyond said naturalist definitions of the cause for well-being. They mobilize forces which would not be in a scientific argument based only on statistical information or on efficiency studies constantly quoted by the foundation in its public performances. In the second place, although the concept of *prana*, used by the most frequent followers of the foundation's activities, such as Julia and Joaquín, is based on sophisticated aspects of Hindu tradition, while people whom I shared so much time with, rarely referred to that intellectual definition, they generally used it, as a synonym of “energy,” and, as we will see next, it was related to a much more vast horizon than that of the foundation itself.

Two years after having participated in that course with Julia and Joaquín, I visited Joaquín in his house in Belgrano, where he sold homemade honey and had a small library with famous books of the so called self-help literature: *El alquimista* [The Alchemist], by Paulo Coelho, *La enfermedad como camino* [The healing power of illness], by Thorwald Dethlefsen and Rudiger Dahlke, the *Libro tibetano de los muertos* [The Tibetan book of the dead], and vegetarian food books. His house had several flower bouquets and a small altar with an image of Ravi Shankar. The very moment I met him again, he told me that he had just come from a reiki class and he was completely “connected.” I asked him how he understood reiki practice as an “alternative therapy” when simultaneously participating in the activities of the foundation, especially considering that reiki is a resource of “energy balance,” that, although it is a widely spread practice in Buenos Aires, it comes from Japanese tradition initiated by the zen Buddhist monk Mikao Usui, far removed from the neo-hinduism that Ravi Shankar proposes. Joaquín dismissed my comment and explained to me that, ultimately, all energy is the same and that we have to look for it in different ways:

I do reiki from time to time, it makes me feel good. Do you think it's an alternative therapy? I don't think so, it's a

practice which restores you energetically, fully complementary with the foundation activities. You try and choose to stay with those things that make you feel good, I think they're both the same. They help me feel comfortable with myself and with the world around me, they're things that make you more conscious. It doesn't have to do with therapy, there are people who become interested in these practices because of health problems, but then they change their lives, they later realize that health problems are a consequence of other processes related to moving energy, which is always the same. In the end, they're all practices that help you feel good, I wouldn't call it therapy, I think that concept doesn't make it justice. (Joaquín)

With this comment, Joaquín was pulling down my own suggestion regarding the difference between the Art of Living and reiki, between which I thought to be a more institutionalized practice and a more "alternative" one, showing me that, from his own spiritual system of well-being construction, they complemented each other. At the same time, he discredited my own differentiation between the spiritual and therapeutic aspects, by saying that the idea of some of these practices being "therapy" was little less than partial, and that the mobilized "energy" was the same.

Soon after, I came across Julia in one of the foundation's talks, since she was very close to people who I had met a long time ago, she invited me to her birthday that was that same afternoon. There was no alcohol, and all the food was vegetarian. At a certain moment, Julia started to talk to some friends about a psychologist she was seeing who worked with akashic records. The "opening of the akashic records" is a widely spread practice among the frequenters of oracular practices, preceded by European esoterism of the 20th century, together with the British theosophist Annie Besant. In any case, the current presence has little to do with that intellectual esoteric matrix and entails a great diffusion in much more articulated versions with positive

psychology and self-help. The consultations suggest that the specialist acts as a medium of entities that possess the enquirer's personal information and that, once said records have been opened, this communication channel serves as a resource for self-knowledge and reconnection with the "ether" or vital energy where a personal record is kept.

The frequent consultations that Julia made to said specialist in akashic records called my attention in a similar way to that when Joaquín visited the reikist. Interestingly enough, many of the assisting participants of The Art of Living expressed great enthusiasm for such practice and they also asked Julia for the contact to make their own consultations. At a certain moment, this resulted in a short conversation about the existence of different ways to access the "energy of Universe" or about "what is hidden inside us." In their opinion, the existence of a vital force was the most important thing. Although they considered the importance of the teachings of guru Ravi Shankar as a "path that sped up the process" of approach to that force, their focus was on connecting by any means possible. They told me that even Ravi Shankar assured that the ways to get that connection are diverse, even though he explained that having a guru helped to not get lost in countless alternatives. How strange was it that frequent participants of an assiduous movement such as the Art of Living experienced other well-being spiritual resources? What differences were there among their own definitions of a spiritual movement and specific practices? Which common elements allowed for that connection and relation to the same vital force?

It is clear that not everyone considers the participation of the Art of Living, especially when there is an intense level of commitment, and specific practices such as reiki or the consultation of the akashic records to be complementary. As Joaquín pointed out, "The Art of Living gives you a path, teachings, a space that allows you to grow," that is, there exists full consciousness that the dimension of the movement creates a belonging space much greater than a personal growth practice. Nevertheless, the possibility of experimenting

and specific practices of other techniques which, from a certain perspective, could be included within alternative therapies, such as reiki, or very specific oracular practices such as the akashic records, appeared to still be on the agenda.

We believe that such recurrence cannot be explained only by Joaquin or Julia's "personal choice," or by the disposition of a "spiritual culture," although we cannot dismiss a dimension of one's own choice nor a greater cultural regularity, arising from a series of specific practices. In a sense, it is important to highlight a dimension capable of explaining the polarity of those analyses, without excluding them completely. Yet, we think it is important to include a dimension which settles down the energy as an organizing force of these relational and practical fabrics between the state of mind, the body and the energetic aspect, helping us understand which form acquires the subjectivity there when we take very seriously the ways in which those involved understand themselves. A subjectivity that, maybe, cannot be considered solely as the continuation of an individual with freedom of choice nor even as the product of a merely human socialization process.⁽³⁴⁾

According to Mol,⁽³⁵⁾ a common medical category does not mean a specific sense or a plurality of senses based on a physical and naturally universal experience, but a plurality of ways of making in act and, thereby, a plurality of practical systems that make it real in its consequences. From this perspective, we understand that all these practices in relation with the construction of the spiritual well-being make up a common circuit forming multiple assemblages between the state of mind, the body and energy. Different assemblages, including practices ranging from *Sudarshan Kriya* to reiki, as well as the akashic records, each with their own systems which would require a more detailed explanation in order to show their particularities.

This circuit is not only a passageway of individuals seeking different spiritual "offers" of well-being, identified as "religious" or "therapeutic," but a larger composition where, if we seriously consider the categories of body,

soul and energy which mobilize there, the very concept of the individual may split up in systems of subjectivation which entail a more relational fabric. A fabric where the separation between a physical and universal phenomenon is not a substratum of different "senses" socially built, but an assemblage in which both the body and the state of mind and the energetic are linked in a spiritual system of well-being.

These assemblages, however, also suggest regularity, mobilized by the same individuals who see there circulation and frequent practices spaces which lead to a similar purpose: seeking a connection with oneself and the cosmos. But it is a regularity resulting from a mapping of these circuits and not imposed by a group or therapy logic.

FINAL WORDS

Undoubtedly, the modern spiritual world is the tip of an iceberg where well-being is central. In this paper, we have addressed some characteristic aspects about the approaches to this process. We think the most significant one is the separation with which it is frequently identified, recognizing the order of the therapeutic as relatively independent from the religious sphere, or, in any case, by seeing in said practices an approach between both.

As we have tried to show, this aspect has relative importance in discourses and public practices, articulations and legitimizing ways which keep the relative autonomy between the spirit and the body can be perceived.

From some frequenters of *The Art of Living* we intended to demonstrate that looking into daily logic may decenter that statement, or, at least, arrange the comparative terms, by differentiating between public discourse and rooted conceptions between the body and the spiritual which are quite challenging.

If in public discourse scientificity or evidence are arguments in favor of the practices that appeared to be body-related, an analysis of the circulation of daily networks proves that

the energy category is a resource that shows a much more articulated fabric between the body and the spiritual, which drifts apart from naturalist explanations. The very circulation of energy accounts for an assemblage between the spiritual, the state of mind and the body which may only be narrowed in each of those terms in order to give a partial explanation for the causes of well-being.

The clue of energy as an articulating factor of the daily dimension shows a more complex fabric which makes up the social morphology and the governing principles of groups and therapeutic practices as an object of analysis in itself. From that point of view, there exists a continuum which constitutes a space of circulation that exceeds the institutional logic of a group or practice and, at the same time, the principles which each of them mobilize, knowing their particularities, may be connected from a common grammar which comprises the terminological and thought systems. As we have already seen from *The Art of Living* followers and their other resources to establish a balanced energetic and spiritual relation, these are articulated in multiple series arising from a *lingua franca*, focused on interiority, relationality and the cosmization of the world.

The analyzed case allowed us to suggest a distance between discourses and public practices regarding the daily practices. In turn, it also allowed to attract attention toward the circulation between distinctive spaces, based on a common spiritual grammar. That emphasis, we believe, is a necessary perspective within a context where practices defined as spiritual are connected with the therapeutic.

When facing processes which do not follow the traditional ways to define the religious as an ecclesiastic organization and an organized system of beliefs, nor the therapeutic as a space of medical-psychological knowledge, approaches that adapt to the object in transformation become necessary.

We have shown, then, the importance of knowing a relational and assembled fabric which challenges the most conventional dualism between the therapeutic/religious. Of course, from a certain perspective, these boundaries exist and constitute ways of institutional and spiritual delimitation, but we think that knowing the multiplicity of frequenters, and even the ways in which their spiritual well-being construction mobilizes forces, relationships and elements beyond these "groups" may be a resource to think beyond what is strictly religious and closer to what is deemed as strictly therapeutic.

Finally, we believe that such trait of modern spirituality could be simultaneously read with a more general process of naturalization of knowledge, practices and techniques used in the modern management of subjectivity. If, as we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, some modern analyses refer to a "technical democracy,"⁽¹⁾ that is, a large broadened circulation of expert knowledge which, while producing hybridizations, goes through non-exclusive social spaces, part of this process may also impact on religious and therapeutic knowledge. Of course, this phenomenon is not completely new, yet its contemporary visibility somewhat communicates its renovated presence.

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