CHAPTER 2

Logics and Limits of New Age Appropriations: Where Syncretism Comes to an End

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This chapter starts with an observation and a doubt. The former is of how the New Age, which has been considered a paradigmatic example of contemporary syncretism or hybridism, systematically excludes several of the most dynamic forms of religion found in the different countries of Latin America. The long list of religious, spiritual or therapeutic practices that anthropologists and sociologists are prone to draw up in order to demonstrate the eclecticism (if not the nonsense) of the New Age, hardly ever includes Pentecostalism, devotion to popular saints, or Afro-American religions. It therefore becomes obvious that while some are invited into this variegated ‘spiritual supermarket’ (Van Hove, 1999), others are excluded.

The doubt that follows this observation is whether the blindness of academia to the syncretic capacity of the New Age—in a continent characterized by this cultural dynamic—has not led to its neglecting to study the equally real and important logics of exclusion, with the subsequent result of a ‘conceptual overestimation’ in drawing the specific contours of the phenomenon to be examined.

In the following pages, therefore, I will develop a reflection on why specific religious practices and beliefs appear to revolve outside the orbit of the New Age, or, following Champion (1993), say why they do not form a part of the ‘mystical-esoteric nebula’. To synthesize, I will sketch a reflection on the limits of appropriation or reinterpretation by the New Age, with a special interest in its relation to the distinct Latin American religious traditions.

The Limits of New Age Appropriation or Reinterpretation

In this work I will argue that as academics we should not allow ourselves to be obfuscated by the apparently infinite capacity of what is usually called the New Age, to mix up and incorporate elements having diverse origins. Many times this potential for unlimited aggregation is the product of a weak construction of the object of study. As academics, we have grouped together practices that seem to us to belong to the New Age, on the basis of common sense
rather than on the basis of a scrupulous and consistent academic conceptual construct. This makes it necessary to recognize the various efforts that have already been made to help find a workable and heuristically productive definition, and to go on from there to making a more coherent construction of this object of study, in order to be able to begin to think in a more specific and more detailed way about the types of incorporations that have occurred (or failed to happen), and about the types of passages and articulations, between elements having different religious origins, and the New Age movement. We will then be in a better position to understand the logics of New Age appropriation (of how it becomes a specific socio-religious movement) and above all to visualize, to comprehend and to distinguish also the limits of this mixture or appropriation.

We will be able, above all, to differentiate: appropriations (what really enters into the circuit on a more or less regular basis) from borrowings (the symbols or images from other traditions that come in only sporadically in the bricolages that only some of the practitioners make up) and the influences that the New Age may exercise over other religious groups—some of whose practitioners might adopt a ‘New Age style’ (Amaral, 1999), without their religious group entering the New Era circuit.

Especially in Latin America, it is necessary to distinguish ‘New Age eclecticism’ from the usual syncretism that is ubiquitous in the region. In a culture in which religious syncretism is a fact of life, it is urgent to comprehend better its New Age version. How is New Age syncretism to be distinguished from the syncretism that for centuries has characterized popular religion and Latin American folk healing? When would the syncretism before us be ‘Latin American’, and when would it be a New Age syncretism? The construction of the object of study must be according to the strictest and most coherent criteria possible; otherwise we run the risk of seeing the New Era everywhere (every example of syncretism becoming a sign of the presence of the New Age), or of seeing it nowhere (so New Age no longer exists). Along with other authors who have studied the subject more exhaustively and with whom I will be conversing in these pages, I propose that there are certain features that distinguish the beliefs and practices of the New Age from those that do not belong so clearly to this movement.1 The tenor of these features means that there can be New Age and Non-New Age versions of what nominally

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1 Here we follow the insights developed by María Julia Carozzi in the various works found in our bibliography, comparing our point of view with that of other Latin American and European authors, and also considering the contributions made by those who took part in the seminar from which this book developed.