The simple question posed by the title of this chapter, “A Latin American New Age?”, comprises two related issues I will address. The first deals with the uniqueness of the Latin American branch of the New Age movement and wonders about its specific characteristics. The second refers to its uniformity and inquires about the internal diversity within Latin America. I will seek to answer these questions by analysing three aspects of the New Age. Firstly, I will explore the collective arrangements or organisational infrastructure (Zald & McCarthy 1990) that contributed to the spread of New Age practices and ideas in Latin American cities. Secondly, I will explore the directions of change proposed and performed within the above-mentioned social arrangements. Finally, I will refer to the diverse frame alignment processes (Snow et al. 1986), or instances of translation of the New Age movement aims and ideas in local terms to make them amenable to potential adherents.

Data presented in this chapter are derived from my own field experience studying the New Age movement in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and by reading works by colleagues in other countries of Latin America. Understanding fades as geographical distance increases. This, together with the fact that Brazilian academic institutions are particularly productive in the social scientific study of religion, makes for a heavy bias in favour of this country and mine, Argentina, as sources of data.

Social scientists in Latin America have analysed different aspects of the New Age from a variety of perspectives, allowing them to frame it as a religious culture (Amaral 1999, 2000), an alternative therapeutic complex (Martins 1999; Tavares 1999), a neo-esoteric circuit (Magnani 1999a, 1999b), a set of practices creating symbolic merchandise (de la Torre & Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2005), and a distinctive version of nativism (González Torres 2000). As I have done elsewhere (Carozzi 1997, 1999,
I will here analyse New Age with a conceptual framework derived from the study of new social movements. This does not mean I will take sides in the discussion about whether the New Age ‘really’ constitutes a movement (Melton 1992; York 1995) or not (Shimazono 1999; Van Hove 1999; Sutcliffe 2003). I chose this conceptual framework since it allows me to relate: a set of organisations and collective arrangements; a number of directions of change proclaimed by discourse and performed in action within those organisations; the effects that those changes bring on different fields of action; and finally the translation of those transformative trends in local terms.

Organisational Infrastructure

At least in São Paulo (Magnani 1999a) and Buenos Aires (Carozzi 1999), the organisation most actively allowing for the spread of the New Age movement during the last two decades of the past century has been a circuit integrating diverse locales within each city through which people traverse in search of health, spiritual development and consciousness amplification. This circuit was labelled “neo-esoteric” in São Paulo (Magnani 1999a, 1999b) and “alternative” in Buenos Aires (Carozzi 2000), terms that reflect more the difficulties in classifying the practices that they encompass rather than any substantial differences between both locations. The core of this circuit consists of people participating interchangeably as healers and patients, speakers and audience members, co-ordinators—or facilitators, as they prefer to be called—and participants, teachers and disciples, writers and readers of a vast array of combined spiritual, esoteric, mystical, ritual, nutritional, (psycho-)therapeutic and body movement techniques and practices. There are, however, at least in Buenos Aires, limits to the above-mentioned exchangeability. When circuit travellers start to offer their own workshops and therapeutic services they generally stop participating in other activities based on disciplines already present in the circuit and subsequently only attend those of newly introduced practices. This accounts for the fact that many recently introduced disciplines very early reach a peak of attendance, losing popularity rapidly thereafter.

Local chapters of the circuit were initially comprised of segments of psychologists, medical doctors, nutritionists, specialists in the supernatural, and dance and gym instructors who, adhering to the movement through reading and participating in activities coordinated by its