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Late-Modern Perspective

Andrew Dawson\*

Senior Lecturer in the Academic Study of Religion  
University of Chester

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\* a.dawson@chester.ac.uk

# The Gnostic Church of Brazil: Contemporary Neo-Esotericism in Late-Modern Perspective

Andrew Dawson

Senior Lecturer in the Academic Study of Religion  
University of Chester

## Abstract

Present in Brazil since 1972, the Gnostic Church of Brazil (Igreja Gnóstica do Brasil) is a neo-esoteric organization that combines traditional and late-modern characteristics. After situating the Gnostic Church of Brazil within Brazil's contemporary neo-esoteric milieu, this article offers a brief description of the organization, its discourse, and its practice. The remainder of the article is given over to detailing and interpreting research data gathered via interview, questionnaire, and participant observation. Drawing on empirical research and theoretical reflection in light of contemporary academic treatments of religion in Brazil, this article examines a number of late-modern dynamics as they are refracted through a particular occupant of Brazil's increasingly fluid religious field.

This article arises from an ongoing research project attempting to map and understand the contemporary religious field of Brazil. Adopting a case study approach, I examine one particular religious organization in detail as a working example that evidences concretely a range of prevailing dynamics and themes relating specifically to what Brazilian academics have come to term *neo-esoteric religion* (e.g., Amaral 2000; Bandeira et al. 1998; Albuquerque 2004; Magnani 2000). After an introductory overview of the contemporary scene in Brazil, I move on to outline the origins and nature of the Gnostic Church of Brazil (Igreja Gnóstica do Brasil). Then data relating to the Gnostic Church of Brazil (gathered by questionnaire, interview, and participant observation) are detailed, analyzed, and interpreted with reference both to the findings of the 2000 Demographic Census of Brazil (Jacob et al. 2003) and to overarching processes and developments affecting the Brazilian religious field as a whole. It is hoped that the examination of a concrete example of contemporary Brazilian neo-esotericism might further understanding of what Carvalho (1992: 139) maintains is an underresearched subject.

#### *CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS FIELD*

Reflecting on the extent and pace of change through the latter part of the 20th century, Pierucci and Prandi (1996: 9) note that “religious life in Brazil has changed in ways never seen before.” They go on to maintain (1996: 10) that

the Brazilian religious panorama has changed not only because people are deserting their traditional gods, laicizing their lives and values, but also because there are growing numbers of others who are adhering to “new” gods, or rediscovering their old gods in new ways.

The politicojuridical space progressively accorded to non-Catholic and, latterly, non-Christian religions, coupled with the sociocultural reverberations of widespread and rapid demographic shift, have done much to facilitate the emergence and subsequent establishment of new forms of religious discourse and practice in Brazil. In addition to much treated neo-Pentecostalism, new religions such as Santo Daime (1920s), União do Vegetal (1960s), and A Barquinha (1945) have emerged in Brazil from the hybridization of indigenous forms of spiritual expression with elements of folk Catholicism, Kardecism, and African-Brazilian religions (Araújo 1998; Frenopoulo 2004: 19–40; Goulart 1999; Mercante 2000). Arriving at a time of widespread sociodemographic and economic and political upheaval, the countercultural movement sweeping the northern hemisphere in the late 1960s and early 1970s found fertile ground among some sections of Brazil’s newly emergent urban-industrial petite bourgeoisie (Carozzi 1999: 149, 184). The recently launched information technology (IT) revolution and the space-time

compression of the globalizing forces to which it contributed have further catalyzed the enhanced availability of actual and virtual alternatives to those already on offer (Robertson 1995: 25–44).

Indicative of a self-consciously cultured disenchantment with traditional forms of socioreligious expression, recently arrived “New Age” movements (e.g., ISKCON/Hare Krishna), freshly repackaged mystical-esoteric organizations (e.g., Eubiose), and emerging non-Brazilian religions (e.g., Soka Gakkai, Seicho-No-Ie) quickly established themselves as legitimate occupants of Brazil’s rapidly pluralizing religious field (Guerriero 2001: 44–56; Magnani 2000: 17–20; Matsue 2002: 119). Such was the thirst for the new, exotic, or just plain different that religiocultural practices previously restricted to immigrant communities (e.g., acupuncture, meditation, tai chi) and rural backwaters (e.g., Santo Daime, A Barquinha) increasingly found a place in the therapeutic programs, leisure pursuits, and mystical-spiritual repertoires of Brazil’s privileged urban classes (Magnani 1999: 71). By the mid-1990s, Brazil had spawned a broad range of its own particular brands of “alternative” New Age and mystical-esoteric discourse and practice (e.g., Vale do Amanhecer, Templo de Boa Vontade, Orion) (Amaral 2000).

Regarded by many academics as paradigmatic of the currents and contours of late-modern society, new religious groups, movements, and organizations in Brazil have been subjected to sustained academic scrutiny in recent years. In addition to indicating the relativizing forces of globalization on the religiocultural field in Brazil (Ramos 1998: 55), new religions are engaged in terms of their individualized (Brandão 1994: 32; Siqueira 1999), merchandised (Pierucci 97: 253), banalized (Pace 1997: 38), improvised (Guerriero 2004: 167), and hybridized (Amaral 2000: 17; Camurça 2000) characteristics. The ways in which new religions embody contemporary modifications of adherent participation in (Magnani 1999: 101), frequency of transit between (Almeida and Montero 2001), and qualified belonging to (Souza 2001) different groups in the religious field are also topics of interest. Such is the visibility of new modes of religious discourse and practice in contemporary Brazil that Guerriero (2004: 161) makes the following observation:

Whether living in a small, medium or large Brazilian city, there is no one unaware of the increasing numbers of new religions ... the presence of new religions has now become a central storyline in one of the most popular T.V. station’s prime time soap operas. If in the past new religions were restricted to a few adepts, today they are part of Brazil’s cultural and religious universe.

### THE NEO-ESOTERIC SECTOR

Known also as *New Age*, *alternative*, or *mystical-esoteric*, Brazilian neo-esoteric groups comprise a diverse category (Magnani 1999: 13; 2000: 28). Siqueira (1998), for example, uses a threefold typology in her mapping of the mystical-esoteric field in and around Brasília:

A number of features constitutive of this plural universe were identified after some years of research: a) *groups of a fundamentally religious orientation* (Cúpulas de Saint Germain, Cavaleiros de Maitreya, Santo Daime, Hare Krishna, etc.); b) *traditional esoteric schools* (Theosophical Society, Sufism, Rosa Cruz, etc.); c) *groups of a psychological-spiritual orientation* (characterized by practices attuned to the development of individual potential, such as meditation, solarization, tarot, astrology, dance, parapsychology). These groups are, in the main, influenced by various kinds of *alternative spiritualizing therapies* (Vidas Passadas, Rosa Mística, etc.).

In his mapping of 842 neo-esoteric groups, organizations, and movements in municipal São Paulo, Magnani proposes a sixfold typology (1999: 24–29; 2000: 29–32). Excluding the twenty-one (2.48%) groups categorized as “others,” the five main categories are as follows:

1. *Initiatory societies* (4.28%) such as the Theosophical Society, Brazilian Society of Eubiose, and Círculo Esotérico da Comunhão do Pensamento. Historically of European immigrant origin, these organizations are characterized by defined doctrinal systems, a body of rituals, and levels of internal hierarchy managed through degrees of initiation.
2. *Multi-service centers* (12.95%), which unite under one roof a variety of services and activities ranging from consultations, therapies, and alternative techniques to sale of products and formation courses and programs. Often run as small businesses, these centers (e.g., Illuminati—Centre for Human Development and Tattva Humi Cultural Venue) tend not to have closed doctrinal systems, instead combining elements from assorted philosophical, religious, and esoteric sources.
3. *Specialist centers* (15.56%), which concentrate chiefly, though not exclusively, on the study and application of a specific discipline (e.g., martial arts), technique (e.g., divination, therapy, meditation), or practice (e.g., dance). Sharing many of the generic characteristics of their multi-service counterparts, specialist centers include, for example, Géia Peace—Institute of Shamanic Studies, Centre for the Study of Acupuncture and Alternative Therapies, and Brazilian Association of Oriental Massage.
4. *Individualized centers* (31%), which are run by one or two people and follow no particular doctrinal or philosophical line. Each of these groups offers a specific service (e.g., astrological mapping, massage and acupuncture,

*búzios* and tarot, shiatsu, palm reading, and chakra-based cures), but when taken collectively, these services constitute a wide variety of neo-esoteric provision.

5. *Sales points* (33.73%), which comprise explicitly commercial ventures that service clients directly through the sale of neo-esoteric products (e.g., books, food, crystals, incense, and music). These *pontos de venda* (e.g., New Age Tourism and Trips, Green World: Natural Esoteric Consumables, and Sankar Sana—Distributor of Indian Goods) also serve as points of contact between customers and neo-esoteric specialists by way of organizing and provisioning courses, talks, and events devoted to specific topics.

The statistical preponderance of commercial ventures in Magnani's neo-esoteric typology corresponds well with Redden's analysis of the commercialization of New Age milieux (2005: 231–246).

Allowing for the approximate nature of any ideal typology (Weber 1991: 324ff.), the Igreja Gnóstica do Brasil (IGB) corresponds with Siqueira's second category of "traditional esoteric schools" (1998) and Magnani's first category of "initiatory societies" (1999: 26; 2000: 29–30). Brought by northern European immigrants influenced by esoteric beliefs and practices that swept across Europe in the latter half of the 19th century, traditional esotericism (e.g., theosophy, anthroposophy, Rosicrucianism) and the initiatory societies that practice it have been officially present in Brazil since the first decades of the 20th century (Magnani 2000: 17). While esoteric religions received only slight statistical representation (0.034%) in the census of 2000 (Jacob et al. 2003: 103), Carvalho (1994: 75) argues that esotericism has permeated and influenced the religious field of Brazil "much more than it seems at first sight." Likewise, as Guerriero (2004: 160) notes and the following data relating to religious identity and participant transit indicate, it is highly likely that participants in nonmainstream religious groups, movements, and organizations such as the IGB are scattered throughout other categories that are better represented in the 2000 Demographic Census.

#### *THE GNOSTIC CHURCH OF BRAZIL*

The IGB is headquartered in Curitiba, the capital of the southern state of Paraná, and is an independent offshoot of the Universal Christian Gnostic Church of Brazil (Igreja Gnóstica Cristã Universal do Brasil). The Universal Christian Gnostic Church of Brazil, based today in São Paulo, holds a quasi-denominational affiliation with the Universal Christian Gnostic Church (Iglesia Gnostica Cristiana Universal) founded by Samael Aun Weor (1917–1977) and legally established in Mexico in 1976. Exploiting the politicojuridical space and religiocultural interest that has been increasingly accorded to nonmainstream Christian religions,

representatives of the Universal Christian Gnostic Movement (Movimiento Gnostico Cristiana Universal) first arrived in Brazil in 1972. It was not until the early 1990s, however, that formal juridical status was gained by the Igreja Gnóstica Cristã Universal do Brasil, a title that the Curitiba-based community subsequently altered to the Igreja Gnóstica do Brasil.

Legally recognized today as a religious organization, the IGB also enjoys formal charitable status through its foundation, FUNDASAW (Fundação Samael Aun Weor), created in 1983, and its sister institute, Associação Beneficente Santa Clara, founded in 1998. Members of the IGB regard their *raison d'être* as preserving (“without adulteration”), divulging, and practicing the doctrines, rituals, and principles bequeathed to the world by the Venerable Master Samael Aun Weor. Born Víctor Manuel Gómez Rodríguez in Santa Fé de Bogotá, Colombia, he adopted the title “Bodhisattva of the Venerable Master Samael Aun Weor” after a series of visions and spiritual experiences. These mystical experiences started after the death of Weor’s mentor in gnostic esotericism, Frater Huiracocha (Arnold Krumm-Heller, 1876–1949) and culminated in 1954 with Weor’s completion of the “Five Great Initiations” at an underground temple in Santa Marta, Colombia. In possession of a “New Gnosis” (*nova gnose*) and charged with the threefold mission of “forming a new culture,” “forging a new civilization,” and “creating the Gnostic movement,” Weor declared the commencement of the Age of Aquarius on February 4, 1962. Weor died (“abandoned his physical body”) on December 24, 1977, subsequently assuming his place, it is said, as a member of the Secret Government of the World that rules from Tibet. After his death, the movement founded by Weor fractured into numerous rival organizations (Zoccatelli 2000: 37–38).

The New Gnosis contained in the published writings (over sixty books), public lectures, and private teachings of Samael Aun Weor informs the discursive and practical core of the IGB. Highly eclectic in character, Weor’s writings draw on a very wide variety of sources, chief among which are the esoteric reflections of H. P. Blavatsky and G. I. Gurdjieff, assorted works of Karl Gustav Jung and Meso-American indigenous cultures, various historical texts (e.g., *Pistis Sophia*) written by purportedly heretical Christian gnostic groups in the early centuries of Christianity’s existence, and the Eastern mystical teachings of Krishnamurti and Sivananda (Zoccatelli 2005). In addition to the primary authoritative resources of Weor, the IGB draws liberally on a broad range of religious (particularly Oriental mystic and tantric) traditions, established esoteric and theosophical sources (e.g., Ledbetter and Steiner), contemporary occultist preoccupations (e.g., extraterrestrialism), and New Age predilections (e.g., spiritual ecology).

Party to the metaphysical inner workings of the cosmos revealed by the New Gnosis of Samael Aun Weor, the IGB regards itself as being charged with the task of communicating the knowledge and practices (e.g., meditative, dietary, and

sexual) necessary for the enlightenment of consciousness and the individual's subsequent release from the cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation. The dissemination of the New Gnosis is carried out under the auspices of the IGB's registered charitable foundation, FUNDASAW. In addition to Portuguese translations (e.g., *Matrimônio Perfeito*, *Curso Zodiacal*, *Rosa Ignea*) and original recordings of Weor's public talks and lectures, the IGB offers its flagship Course in New Gnosis (Curso de Nova Gnose), which is supplemented by other materials such as the Course in Astral Projection (Curso de Projeciologia), Course in Meditation (Curso de Meditação), Course in Esoteric Cabala (Curso Esotérico de Cabala), Course in Esoteric Anthropology (Curso de Antropologia Esotérica), and series of yogic exercises (Manancial de Juventude). Catechetical works written by IGB instructors are also available for purchase (e.g., *Steps on the Way* and *Pearls for an Aspirant on the Holy Path* by Daniel Ruffini). These materials are available for purchase on CD or via Internet subscription.

Regarded as the "first chamber" (*Primeira Câmara*) of IGB activity, according to IGB instructor Carlos Bunn, FUNDASAW responded to approximately 40,000 requests for information between 2001 and 2002 and continues to send materials to over 8,000 people throughout Brazil and beyond. Although FUNDASAW organizes courses and events in Curitiba and other parts of the country (e.g., São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro), given the vastness of the country, the relative cost of travel, and the contemporary facility of IT media, it is via the Internet that the overwhelming bulk of its contacts are made and sustained. The Internet-based Course in New Gnosis functions as the central pillar of FUNDASAW's task of disseminating the New Gnosis of Samael Aun Weor as interpreted and practiced by the IGB. Over 900 pages long and compartmentalized into nine "Arcanes" (*arcanos*), the course covers the gamut of esoteric and mystical teaching as revealed by Samael Aun Weor and augmented by IGB instructors. The course includes, for example, materials relating to cosmic origins and destiny, the nature of the self, the path of initiation, white magic, gnostic psychology, sexual alchemy (the core component of Weor's teaching), and the place of charity. Developed from a preexisting correspondence course inherited from the Universal Christian Gnostic Church, the Course in New Gnosis was reworked and launched on the Internet in November 1983 (the same time at which FUNDASAW was created). According to Bunn, the Course in New Gnosis has had approximately 14,000 completions since its inception in 1983, had 3,000 current students as of April 2004, and sees approximately 500 subscriptions commencing and an equal number terminating per month.

Although IGB support for students of the Course in New Gnosis has undergone a number of revisions since its inception, the principal medium of instructor clarification and guidance today is an e-mail-based support group (*grupo de apoio*), which recipients of the course can join through an Internet



service provider subscription system. The e-mail group is managed by an IGB representative, to whom most messages are addressed in search of clarification and further technical detail and through whom all e-mails pass before being posted to list members. As part of my research engagement with the IGB and its adherents, I have been a member of this Internet-based group since July 2003. In addition to Internet group membership, I have subscribed to and worked through all of the aforementioned courses of the IGB, as well as conducting fieldwork in Brazil by way of formal interviews with IGB leaders, informal interviews with IGB participants, and participant observation of two three-day seminars held over the Easter weekends of 2003 (April 18–20) and 2004 (April 9–11). Designed to offer an intensive engagement with the New Gnosis of the IGB, these seminars were attended by people (some of whom were members of the Internet support group) from different parts of urban Brazil.

Much of the data that follows was gathered from members of this group by means of a self-completion questionnaire that was e-mailed on December 15, 2003, to every group member who was active between September 1 and December 10, 2003. Prefaced by a brief introduction, the first section contained a number of classification questions designed to collect factual information relating to place of birth, sex, skin color, and age. Behavioral information pertaining to current occupation and religious affiliation (past and present) was also sought in the first and second sections. The second section concerned itself with mapping respondent participation in broader social activities and, more specifically, with respondents' involvement (past and present) with "religious/mystical/esoteric groups." While the questions endeavored to elicit factual information regarding names of groups and length of respondent involvement, the use of the (contested and consciously inclusive) phrase *religious, mystical, esoteric* was also an attempt to garner attitudinal responses to each of the words making up this overarching phrase. It was through three deliberately open-ended questions toward the end of the questionnaire, however, that data of an explicitly attitudinal/qualitative kind was sought. Here, respondents were asked what they hoped to gain from their study of the New Gnosis, how they would define *religion, mysticism, esotericism*, and where such religion, mysticism, esotericism might be found today.

Of the 110 questionnaires that were sent out, twenty-five completed questionnaires were returned, giving a positive response rate of 22.7%.<sup>1</sup> While a sample size of twenty-five completed questionnaires inevitably requires caution with respect to the generalizability of what follows, two corroborative factors should be noted by way of confirmatory triangulation. First, the data gathered by questionnaire compare favorably in almost every respect with the findings of

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, one respondent unwittingly sent an infected e-mail attachment that could not be opened, four participants responded to my e-mail but declined to participate, four e-mails bounced back as addressee unfound, and the remainder went unanswered.

Bandeira et al. in their much larger 1996 study of 200 members of over forty-six different mystical/esoteric groups in the Federal District of Brasília (Bandeira et al. 1998). Second, as will be seen presently, the questionnaire results relate positively to the information furnished by my participant observation of the two Easter seminars. Furthermore, and as the following data indicate, the frequency of participant transit between the IGB and other sectors of the religious field might well provide grounds for extrapolation and the making of broader observations on a range of dynamics currently at play in the contemporary religiocultural terrain of Brazil.

### *QUESTIONNAIRE PARTICIPANT PROFILES*

#### *Age and Marital Status*

Of the twenty-four (96%) questionnaire respondents who indicated their age, six (25%) were younger than 20 years of age, eight (33.3%) were between 20 and 29 years of age, seven (29.2%) were between 30 and 39 years of age, and three (12.5%) were between 40 and 49 years of age. The fact that 58.3% of respondents were 29 years old or younger compares favorably with the findings of Bandeira et al. (1998), who recorded 47% of respondents as being 28 years of age or younger. The weighting of these figures toward the younger end of the age spectrum also corresponds with my estimations of the age ranges of both sets of participants at the Easter seminars of 2003 and 2004. Such bulging toward the lower end of the age range contrasts with figures relating to age distribution throughout Brazil in general, in which approximately 25% of the population are between 16 and 30 years of age, and, more specifically, the top-end bulging that is encountered in analyzing data on the established and more traditional religions of Brazil (Jacob et al. 2003: 24, 77). As one would generally expect with neo-esoteric groups such as the IGB, their relative novelty and exoticism attract greater numbers of people from younger age groups, who have less well established patterns of social reproduction and a greater openness to the culturally heterodox.

Of the twenty-four (96%) respondents who supplied information about their marital status, twelve (50%) were single, eight (33.3%) were married, and four (16.7%) were separated or divorced. These figures give a cumulative 66.7% of nonmarried respondents, which compares favorably with the 67% of Bandeira et al.'s (1998) respondents who were either single (54%), separated (8%), or divorced (5%). Likewise, the 33.3% return of married respondents is comparable with the 26% recorded by Bandeira et al. By way of further comparison, of the thirty-two (twenty-five in 2003 and seven in 2004) male participants of the two seminars who were not in the company of a female partner, the majority of those with whom I spoke were either single, separated, or divorced. Both my findings

and those of Bandeira et al. (1998) record a higher percentage of respondents who were single than the 39% returned by the 2000 Demographic Census (Jacob et al. 2003: 13). Although the relative youth of those engaged by myself and Bandeira et al. might account for this higher percentage of respondents who were single, it might also be the case that neo-esoteric groups such as the IGB attract single people who see these groups as potential social networks through which a partner might be sought. This was certainly the impression I got when I talked with a number of single, separated, and divorced participants at both seminars.

### *Socioeconomic Status*

As with both sets of seminar participants, respondents to the e-mail questionnaire regarded themselves as overwhelmingly white. Of the twenty-five who recorded skin color (I intentionally avoided terms relating to race and ethnicity), twenty-two (88%) regarded themselves as white (*branca*), and three (12%) considered themselves brown (*parda*). Even allowing for prevailing perceptions as to the cultural stigma associated with dark skin types, these figures again contrast with the findings of the 2000 Demographic Census, in which approximately 54% of the Brazilian population regarded themselves as white, 6% as black, 39% as brown, and fewer than 1% each as yellow and indigenous (Jacob et al. 2003: 13). The data on skin type are, I believe, related to the variables of education and occupation.

Asked to record their educational attainment to date, two (8%) respondents indicated that they had gone no further than a primary grade (finishing at approximately 14 years of age), fifteen (60%) had completed a secondary grade (completed between 15 and 17 years of age), five (20%) had completed undergraduate studies, and three (12%) had some form of graduate qualification. Although these figures indicate that 32% of respondents had completed studies at a postsecondary level (compared with 55% of Bandeira et al.'s), when the figures are cross-tabulated with respondent occupation (see below), it can be seen that four (16%) of the twenty-five respondents recorded themselves as students and had yet to complete their postsecondary education. Therefore the actual figure of 32% of respondents who had completed studies at a postsecondary level should be read as lower than the probable percentage (48%) of respondents who will go on to attain qualifications at a higher level. Even without taking this factor into consideration, when the survey results are compared with the 2000 census figures, respondents' levels of educational attainment far outstrip those of the 66% of Brazilians who have not gone beyond a primary grade, the 25% who have studied at the secondary level, and the 9% who have studied at the undergraduate level and beyond (Jacob et al. 2003: 13).

Given the established relationship between educational attainment and occupational status within and outside Brazil, it is not surprising that the relatively high levels of education enjoyed by the respondents to the e-mail questionnaire are reflected in the data on current occupation. Again reflecting the relative youthfulness of a number of respondents, four (16%) recorded themselves as students. Of the remainder, five (20%) worked in a clerical/administrative role, three (12%) were employed in a managerial capacity, eight (32%) were professionals, three (12%) fell within a miscellaneous category, and one (4.2%) was in manual employment. As is to be expected with Brazil's socioeconomic profile, the negligible recording of manual labor and the complete absence of anyone employed in domestic labor stand in stark contrast to the census figures of 2000 relating to occupational position (Jacob et al. 2003: 13). Taken alongside the above figures for education, the returns relating to occupation are strongly indicative of the high representation within the sample of people from the Brazilian middle classes. The relatively high presence of those from Brazil's middle socioeconomic tiers would also go some way toward explaining the relatively low number of respondents who recorded themselves as brown and the lack of respondents who considered themselves black. The relative overrepresentation of those from the middle sectors of society within neo-esoteric groups such as the IGB is well documented by commentators such as Magnani (2000: 28), who writes from a Brazilian perspective; Contepomi (1999: 131), writing within an Argentinean context, Parker (1997: 142), who writes from a Chilean perspective; and Heelas (1996: 121), who has examined the British New Age scene. Although Parker (1997: 142) notes the need for further study into the statistical preponderance of the urban petite bourgeoisie in neo-esoteric circles, little has been done to explore this clear "elective affinity" (Weber 1991: 284–285). Magnani (2000: 106), however, suggests that such a relationship exists because the urban middle classes are those most imbued by the kind of individualism and modernizing tendencies manifested by neo-esoteric groups. Although an explicitly antimodern rhetoric pervades neo-esoteric discourse (Albuquerque 2004: 144), both Hammer (2001) and Hanegraaff (1996) have established beyond a doubt the modernist predilections of actual neo-esoteric values and practices. Despite appearances, it is maintained, the modern values and practices of neo-esotericism attract those sectors of society that are most attuned to the characteristics of modernity.

Although limited space precludes a more detailed exploration of this kind of like-attracts-like argument (one that treats the neo-esoteric milieu as something entered into and left by different social groups), I wonder whether a slightly different tack might not prove more fruitful in the long run. If, for example, neo-esoteric discourse and practice were treated as manifestations of the petite bourgeois *habitus* (rather than something that simply corresponds with it), this

might allow for a more subtle appreciation of neo-esotericism. This more subtle appreciation of neo-esotericism would locate its discursive, practical, and evaluative regimes, as well as the people who participate in them, within a broader macrostructural context that is better able to include overarching dynamics of an economic, political, and sociocultural nature. Neo-esoteric discourse and practice are hybridized, individualistic, and posttraditional, it can be argued, because those who generate and articulate it are likewise hybridized, individualistic, and posttraditional. In making the relationship between neo-esotericism and the middle classes a directly causal one, then, neo-esoteric discourse and practice can be considered as part of a broader treatment of the nature and implications of the socioeconomic location of the urban-industrial petite bourgeoisie within the late-modern landscape of contemporary existence. Perhaps more a difference in degree than one in kind, the difference between asking “Why does neo-esotericism attract the middle classes more than any other?” and “In what ways does neo-esotericism reflect its petite bourgeois origins?” might nevertheless prove significant.

### *Religious Identity and Belonging*

When asked about the religious identity of their family of origin, nineteen (76%) respondents recorded Roman Catholicism, two (8%) selected traditional Protestantism, one (4%) chose traditional sect (*seita*), and three (12%) recorded none. These figures compare very favorably with those of Bandeira et al. (1998), who recorded 76% of respondents as having been brought up in a Roman Catholic family environment and 6% in a traditional Protestant one. When the questionnaire results are compared with the 2000 census findings on religious affiliation, it can be seen that these percentages correspond roughly with a return of approximately 74% Roman Catholic, 5% traditional Protestant, and 7.4% “without religion” (Jacob et al. 2003: 15, 69, 115). Given the statistical preponderance of Roman Catholicism (more or less evenly across the socioeconomic spectrum), it is unsurprising that the majority of my respondents hail from families of a Roman Catholic persuasion.

Mention might also be made of the absence of neo-Pentecostal, Spiritist, and African-Brazilian religions as religions within which questionnaire respondents were reared. Of course, the relatively low percentage of the Brazilian population who record themselves as belonging to Spiritist (1.3%) or African-Brazilian (0.3%) religions (Jacob et al. 2003: 101) surely has something to do with this. As was noted above, however, the absence in neo-esoteric groups of people from the socioeconomically poorer sectors of society (within which African-Brazilian religions have traditionally been rooted) must also be taken into account. In a similar vein, the absence of neo-Pentecostalism (with 10.6% of the population) as

a prior religion could likewise be related to the statistical preponderance of those from the poorer sectors of society participating in these groups. It might, however, also be because the emergence and exponential growth of neo-Pentecostalism are relatively recent phenomena in Brazil (3.9 million members in 1980, 8.8 million in 1991, and 18 million in 2000). Therefore the likelihood of respondents having been reared in a neo-Pentecostal family is somewhat more limited than that of having been reared in a Roman Catholic or traditional Protestant family. A further factor relating to the absence of Spiritist, African-Brazilian, and neo-Pentecostal histories is the possibility that individuals who were reared in these religions might be less likely than those reared in other religions to be attracted by neo-esoteric groups such as the IGB and those studied by Bandeira et al. (1998). In effect, certain religious contexts might be more resilient and less amenable than others to the kind of religious switching that leads individuals who were reared within one tradition to participate in or belong to another. Interestingly, Loveland's U.S.-based analysis finds a resilience to switching within Roman Catholicism, with a greater likelihood of religious transit among Protestant denominations (2003: 154).

When asked to identify their current religion, six (26%) of the twenty-three respondents who did so recorded a mainstream Christian denomination, one (4.3%) identified a number of religions (Christianity and African-Brazilian among them), one (4.3%) recorded a traditional Brazilian religion, one (4.3%) listed a number of New Age practices, four (17.4%) replied that they had no religion, and ten (43.5%) labeled themselves via a miscellany of terms that fall clearly within accepted esoteric/mystic/gnostic markers. Two points are worthy of note here. First, four respondents did not regard themselves as being religious and therefore did not see their participation in the IGB-run Internet support group as a mode of religious expression. This refusal to perceive participation in the Internet support group as entailing religious activity in many ways corresponds with the attitude of a good number of participants at both seminars who regarded their study of New Gnosis and seminar attendance as more of a lifestyle choice than a religious quest.

Such a nonreligious interpretation of engagement with the IGB's New Gnosis again comes to the fore in questionnaire responses to the question "What do you hope to gain from the New Gnosis?" Of the twenty-five responses that were offered, words and phrases relating to the acquisition of knowledge and understanding appear in eighteen (72%) replies. Five (20%) replies contain words and phrases concerning personal growth and betterment. The use of the word *caminho* ("way" or "path") in three (12%) responses further underlines the notion of transition. That this transition from one condition to another is understood as being achieved over and against something else and with a degree of exertion is evidenced through the appearance of words such as "conquest," "triumph," "liberation," and "effort" in seven (28%) responses. While it might be argued,

albeit indirectly, that a number of these responses contain material that reflects certain established religious motifs (e.g., wisdom, transition, liberation), it is nevertheless the case that the kind of vocabulary and syntax traditionally associated with religion is in very short supply here. I believe this to be so because the respondents are not seeking to acquire what might be understood as traditionally religious goods from their engagement with the IGB and its New Gnosis.

Indifference to the pursuit of traditional religious goods proceeds to outright rejection by a number of respondents in their replies to the question “How would you define religion/mysticism/esotericism?” Five (20%) of the twenty-five respondents differentiated between the terms *religion*, *mysticism*, and *esotericism*. Here, religion was defined pejoratively through words such as *dogmas*, *doctrines*, *precepts*, *organized*, and *escape valve*. In contrast, mysticism and, to a greater extent, esotericism were defined by this group in a more positive light by terms relating to connectedness and understanding. Of the twenty (75%) respondents who did not differentiate between the terms *religion*, *mysticism*, and *esotericism*, seven (35%) used words redolent of neo-esoteric and New Age preoccupations with connectedness with the inner self, being, or deity; six (30%) offered definitions relating to knowledge and understanding; and four (20%) indicated that such a definition is beyond human ken. A sense of dissatisfaction with the prevailing religious field again appeared in responses offered to the final question of the questionnaire. When asked to identify where “religion, mysticism, esotericism” is/are to be found today, twelve (54.5%) of the twenty-two respondents who offered a reply used overwhelmingly negative language, for example, “in second place,” “degenerated,” “in reverse,” “distorted,” “a joke,” “nowhere,” “merchandised.” Of the remaining replies, three (13.6%) refer to “religion, mysticism, esotericism” as being most important in the lives of the respondent, while the remainder locate “religion, mysticism, esotericism” in an assortment of places (e.g., “new discoveries,” “spiritual growth,” “life,” “the human mind”).

The second point to emerge from respondents’ identification of their current religion concerns the extent to which respondents did not regard membership of this group as constituting their entire religiospiritual identity. Recall that of the twenty-three responses offered, fewer than half (43.5%) used standard neo-esoteric markers, and still fewer referred solely to the neo-esotericism of the IGB. Concomitantly, while 13 (56.5%) of the twenty-three respondents use neo-esoteric markers to identify the “religious, mystical, esoteric” groups with which they were engaged at the time, only ten (43.4%) indicate an exclusive membership in the New Gnosis support group. Even allowing for the six (26.1% of the twenty-three) respondents who replied “none” to this question (each of whom admits elsewhere to be studying the New Gnosis of the IGB), these figures

compare favorably with the 55% of respondents of Bandeira et al. (1998) who admitted to concurrent participation in a number of neo-esoteric groups. The prevalence of concurrent participation in multiple neo-esoteric groups among those connected with the IGB is further supported by conversations with participants at both seminars. At each event (although not in the hearing of IGB instructors), participants freely admitted to belonging to, participating in, or circulating among a number of other groups, most of which had neo-esoteric or New Age characteristics.

In addition to owning their concurrent participation in multiple neo-esoteric and New Age groups and organizations, seminar participants (again, out of earshot of IGB instructors) spoke of having already passed through or engaged with a wide range of religious, mystical, and esoteric movements. Further confirmation of this sequential passage through traditional religious and new mystical-esoteric groups is provided by the seventeen (70.8% of twenty-four) questionnaire respondents who acknowledged such past participation. Five (20.8%) respondents listed a variety of neo-esoteric groups through which they had passed; five (20.8%) acknowledged having mixed with a mainstream Christian, African-Brazilian, or traditional sect (*seita*); five (20.8%) recorded a mixture of these first two categories; one (4.2%) listed a range of New Age practices; one (4.2%) reported a new Brazilian religion (União do Vegetal); and seven (29.2%) replied that they had not participated in any religious, mystical or esoteric group in the past (of this group, four respondents (57%) were younger than 20 years of age). It can be seen, then, that most participants in IGB programs, although predominantly Roman Catholic to start with, eventually found their way to the IGB through a diverse range of traditional religious and emergent neo-esoteric contexts.

In terms of the length of time that support group participants had been involved with the IGB, ten (40%) of the twenty-five respondents indicated a period of less than six months, six (24%) gave a period of between six months and one year, six (24%) indicated a period of one to two years, and three (12%) gave a time frame of three to five years. The fact that sixteen (64%) respondents had spent no more than one year involved in the New Gnosis of the IGB (increasing to twenty-two, or 88%, who had spent no more than two years) corresponds with information gained from participants at the Easter seminars of 2003 and 2004. Excluding IGB instructors and their partners (all of whom had been with the IGB since its inception), the overwhelming majority of seminar participants had likewise spent less than two years studying the New Gnosis. Given these data, it can be seen that current interaction with the IGB represents for many participants no more than a temporary stopping-off point on a variegated personal trajectory. In effect, participants in IGB-sponsored programs should be expected to have a relatively short-term and nonexclusive relationship with this group before moving



on to establish concurrent links with other religious and neo-esoteric organizations.

Typified by successive switching between, and concurrent participation in, assorted groups and organizations, the religious transit (e.g., Amaral 2000: 17; Almeida and Monteiro 2001; Guerriero 2004: 159; Magnani 2000: 50) of IGB clientele is indicative of contemporary dynamics that have inverted customary relationships between religiocultural communities and their respective participants (Brandão 1994: 34–35; Amaral 2000: 19). This late-modern inversion of established personal and collective priorities and expectations is part of a broader picture in which the individual self has now come to prominence as the foundational “principle of hierarchization” (Bourdieu 1991: 168) by which contemporary modes of belonging are evaluated. Belonging to and participation in movements and organizations relative to personalized criteria instrumentally orientated to subjective fulfillment have become important priorities, and the self and its “project” now constitute the central dynamic of individual-collective relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 1–21; Giddens 1991: 70–108). Analysis of the processes of individualization and their implications for contemporary religious belonging have been well treated by academics of the religious field, both in Latin America (e.g., Amaral 2000: 19; Mallimaci 1997: 83–84; Prandi 1997: 65) and beyond (e.g., Beckford 2003: 209; Bruce 2002: 10–12; Heelas 1996: 2). Central to many of these discussions has been the recognition that the processes of individualization both comprise and facilitate individual freedom to appropriate, almost at will, whatever religiocultural resources are available for personal consumption. Released from the traditional confines of collective determination, individuals are now freer than ever to pick and choose whatever practical, theoretical, or moral resources are best suited to their increasingly “flexibilised” personal predilections and idiosyncrasies (Bourdieu 1998: 84). The late-modern self has become a *bricoleur* par excellence, mixing and matching elements from practical regimes, conceptual approaches, and moral systems that were once thought to be mutually exclusive (Magnani 2000: 12, 88).

The institutional implications of contemporary religious transit are that groups such as the IGB will have a relatively high turnover of clientele who will have a relatively short-term and nonexclusive relationship with the group. The downside of this transient relationship is that organizations such as the IGB must work hard to maximize institutional return in the relatively short time that they have with each participant. That the IGB is doing this is evidenced by its frequent remodeling of its Internet-based course support groups (the latest of which includes an additional “advanced” group that is open to those willing to make a monthly donation), regular repackaging of “revised” courses with “new” and “better presented” contents, and production of new courses, events, and goods (e.g., crystals, soaps, and candles) available to members at a discounted price.

There is an upside to religious transit, however, in that the contemporary dynamics of switching and concurrent participation entail a steady stream of fresh religious nomads (Camurça 2000) waiting to find or be attracted by the IGB and other such groups. The increasing importance of the Internet in enabling groups such as the IGB to trawl for and be found by these religious nomads has been recognized by the IGB leadership and is evidenced by the investments made in initial Web site design and its ongoing management (e.g., [www.fundasaw.org.br](http://www.fundasaw.org.br)). In effect, the Internet allows a relatively small group such as the IGB to project a virtual image far beyond that of its actual organizational spread in real space-time, a modification (“distanciation”) of space-time relationships that Giddens (1991: 20–21) regards as integral to late-modernity.

Citing numerous studies to support their viewpoint, Cowan and Hadden (2004: 125) correctly remark that “the Internet has not proved a particularly successful medium for the recruitment of significant numbers of converts to new religious movements.” When asked how they had found out about the IGB and its Course in New Gnosis, however, sixteen (64%) of respondents indicated that they had discovered New Gnosis when surfing the Internet. Of the remainder, seven (28%) replied that a friend or relation had introduced them to the course and/or the IGB, and two (8%) indicated that they had obtained information about the course through attendance of IGB events. Likewise worthy of note is the fact that a majority of those studying the New Gnosis at the time of the survey (and a good number of seminar participants) came across the IGB during the course of a more generalized Internet search of neo-esoteric sites. With no specific organization or movement in mind, these online seekers were surfing the Web in an almost ad hoc fashion, both exploiting the contents and contributing to the development of the kind of Internet resources made available by groups such as the IGB. The importance of the Internet in enabling the IGB to enhance participation in its courses and events cannot be underestimated.

Given the geographical vastness of Brazil and the attendant problems (e.g., time and expense) of traveling across the country, the mobilization of IT resources rewards institutional investment by massively broadening the scope of organizational reach. By posting well-presented pages and carefully crafting sites to optimize the chances of being found by Internet searches, groups such as the IGB are able to utilize cyberspace in a way that maximizes participant returns relative to initial start-up costs of site development and the ongoing expenses of site maintenance. A complementary dialectic of virtual supply and demand can thereby be posited here. On the one hand, organizations such as the IGB mobilize contemporary IT resources to take advantage of the power of the Internet by designing sites in such a way as to lead the curious surfer from an initial encounter to a more sustained participation in movement programs and activities. On the other hand, interested individuals or the just plain curious are likewise

exploiting late-modern technological developments and surfing the Web guided by a series of search terms, which in this instance are more or less related to neo-esoteric themes. Each of these corresponding dynamics has, in its own way, contributed to the formation in contemporary cyberspace of a virtual neo-esoteric milieu, a direct, albeit late-modern, parallel of the cultic milieu identified by Campbell (1972) and further explored by Balch and Taylor (1978). Complementing the actual neo-esoteric “circuits” sketched by Magnani (1999) and others cited above, the virtual neo-esoteric milieu of cyberspace is likewise populated by seekers intent on appropriating the kinds of religiocultural capital not available in mainstream religious or secular Brazilian society. Given Brazil’s geographical vastness and the concomitant difficulties of travel, however, many relationships established between trawling organizations and seeking individuals remain principally impersonal in that they are mediated through the Internet and other electronic media (e.g., CD-ROM).

In addition to allowing groups such as the IGB to project a virtual image beyond that of their actual organizational spread, the Internet further permits the projection of a virtual image that is not necessarily the same as that realized in everyday space-time. In effect, the Internet permits an enhanced degree of divergence to exist between how a group presents itself through its primary Web pages and auxiliary sites and the actual day-to-day reality it lives as an organization populated by real people in a particular geographical location at a specific point in time. The manner in which and extent to which organizations, like individual human beings, manage their appearance to ensure that the best possible image is projected has been well expressed through concepts such as “frame alignment” and “collective impression management” (Goffman 1974; Tilly et al. 1975). Applying in equal measure to religious (Carozzi 1999: 152; Frigerio 1997: 153–177) and secular (Crossley 2002: 133–143; Dellaporta and Diani 1999: 74–77) institutions, concepts such as these serve to underline the ways in and degrees to which groups such as the IGB survive and flourish by ensuring the continued alignment of their collective image with their respective and ever-changing environments in a way that maximizes organizational return. Whether perceived in terms of financial gain, numerical growth, structural expansion, or ideological success, maximal organizational return is thereby dependent on some form of self-conscious management of a projected collective image that is capable of adapting to changing circumstances.

Although a degree of correlation between projected image and actual fact is expected, in real terms the particular image projected by a group or movement does not (perhaps should not) always reflect the actual nitty-gritty of everyday organizational life. Should the projected image diverge too much from actual reality, however, organizations and movements leave themselves open to a host of problems, not least of which are the rapid disappointment and subsequent

departure of disillusioned adherents and would-be sponsors. When it comes to groups such as the IGB, however, the nature of the relationship between the image that is projected and the day-to-day reality that is lived in time and space undergoes something of a change. Central to this modification is the place of the Internet in mediating between the organizational reality that is the IGB and the individual experiences of IGB-provisioned course participants. In effect, because the majority of the relationship between the IGB and its course participants takes place in virtual time and space, the extent to which the collective impression generated by the IGB needs to correlate with its actual organizational existence is lessened. The mediation of the Internet between the IGB and its clients thereby allows an enhanced degree of elasticity to exist between what the IGB says it is and what it actually is.

As a “traditional esoteric school/initiatory society” (Magnani 2000: 29–30; Siqueira 1998), the IGB has inherited an institutional identity whose repertoire of action includes formalized authority structures, discursive patterns, and practical regimes that strongly resemble those of mainstream religious organizations. Using the appellation *church*, claiming to be in possession of divine revelation and utilizing appointed priests to orchestrate received liturgies that are practiced according to schedule in a purpose-built temple, for example, the IGB community of Curitiba self-consciously enjoys the formal trappings of many other more traditional religious institutions.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the IGB stands within an established esoteric tradition whose foremost figures (e.g., Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, and Steiner) and themes (e.g., ego-self dualism, orientalism, and perennialism) remain central to many components of contemporary New Age discourse and practice (Heelas 1996: 44–48). As a result of New Age appropriation of traditional esoteric figures and themes, there exists a syntactical overlap between much of the language employed by the IGB and many of the organizations, groups, and movements that populate the contemporary neo-esoteric scene. The difference is that whereas the Curitiba-based headquarters of the IGB still retains what is, to all intents and purposes, a formally religious identity, those who populate the contemporary neo-esoteric milieu of Brazil are, by and large, indifferent if not hostile to such received religious motifs (Carozzi 1999: 186; Magnani 2000: 120). As was indicated above, a large number of questionnaire respondents and seminar participants fall into this category.

Given the IGB’s desire to situate itself within the existing neo-esoteric milieu of contemporary Brazil, the apparent dissonance between the organization’s ostensibly religious character and the apathy toward formalized religion of most neo-esoteric seekers is likely to create a number of problems, not least that of recruitment. Given the mediation of the Internet between the IGB and the

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<sup>2</sup> IGB rituals and authority structures are informed by Weor’s *Santa Iglesia Gnostica: Libro da Liturgia* (São Paulo: Editorial Sol Nascente, n.d.).

majority of its adherents, however, the organization is able to limit the implications of this incongruity by downplaying in electronic format the formalized religious components of its day-to-day identity. Removed from the empirical confines of everyday time and geographical space and unencumbered by the evidentiary experience of participant involvement in temple-based activity, the IGB adopts a virtual rhetoric that plays up its neo-esoteric credentials by exploiting the syntactical overlap of traditional esotericism and New Age discourse. Bypassing almost entirely its formalized religious characteristics, the IGB instead locates itself within mainstream neo-esotericism by presenting itself and its courses as embodying just one among many lifestyle systems currently on offer in the neo-esoteric milieu. In effect, the electronic materials made available by the IGB convey a virtual image of the organization that has been modified to ensure its alignment with the existing predilections of the contemporary neo-esoteric milieu. Minimizing the formalized religious components of its everyday organizational identity, the IGB seeks to maximize its organizational return through the projection of a virtual image that, while not belying its daily actuality, nevertheless contrasts with it.

If IGB figures are anywhere near accurate, the organization's strategy of virtual frame alignment with the prevailing predilections of the neo-esoteric milieu appears to work. On the one hand, IGB instructors and those based in Curitiba are able to continue practicing the ostensibly religious repertoire of action inherited from past generations. On the other hand, the organization is able to exploit the mediation offered by late-modern technology (and necessitated by the geographical vastness of Brazil) to project an image of itself that maximizes its appeal to the neo-esoteric milieu of Brazil by downplaying the movement's formalized religious characteristics. Were the IGB seeking to integrate these individuals within the life of its temple-based activities, then the incongruity between the virtual image that attracted them and the reality that awaits them would inevitably result in a range of tensions and eventual disillusionment. As things stand now, though, the mediated relationship between the IGB and its course participants means that it continues to benefit from the finances and institutional self-esteem generated by its Internet-based recruitment of neo-esoteric seekers while avoiding the potential pitfalls generated by their integration into the actual community of normal time and space.

The benefits of the existing relationship between the IGB and its clients, however, do not flow in just one direction. In addition to the gains that accrue to the IGB, recipients of IGB materials likewise benefit from getting what they want without having to become embroiled in the kind of formalized religious activity to which the majority of them are either indifferent or openly hostile. Furthermore, freed from the regular and unmediated physical oversight of IGB authorities, course participants enjoy a much greater latitude to pick and choose the elements

of IGB discourse and practice that most suit the profile of the late modern *bricoleur*. In effect, the mediated relationship between the IGB and its clients allows the latter to appropriate IGB teachings on their own terms rather than those dictated by the IGB.

Of course, this is not to imply that no such experiential or performative space exists in the normal course of routine, unmediated participant engagement with other, more traditional religious institutions. Although realized to a greater or lesser extent relative to a given institutional context, the particular experiences of individual participants cannot be, except in the most extreme cases, completely overridden by the prevailing organizational paradigm. There is nearly always latitude for the experiential and performative divergence of individuals from the practical, theoretical, and evaluative regimes of any religious organization (Bell 1992: 207–208). At the same time, however, individual participants within a collective religious regime are constantly subjected to a variety of dynamics (e.g., ritual persuasion, peer pressure, official censure or sanctioned exclusion) geared to limiting idiosyncratic appropriation and ensuring an at least minimal conformity to orthodox organizational practices, beliefs, and values (Bourdieu 1991: 107–116). Given the mediated nature of the relationship between the IGB and course participants, however, individual recipients of IGB materials enjoy a much greater latitude in their personal appropriation or rejection of the organization's teachings than do those who are involved in more conventional, unmediated modes of religious participation. Indeed, released from the tensions and potential conflicts generated by standard institutional patterns of orthodoxy maintenance, both the organization and the individual participant enjoy the benefits of a mediated relationship in which each is able to maximize its return relative to the respective investment made.

### Sex

As in most countries of a chiefly urban-industrial nature, and allowing for the slight demographic preponderance of Brazilian women (51%) to men (49%), the number of women participating in formal religious activities in Brazil outweighs the number of males (Jacob et al. 2003: 13).<sup>3</sup> The observations of Bandeira et al. (1998), Magnani (1999: 110), Siqueira (1999), and Labate (2004: 146) reflect the fact that most neo-esoteric groups correlate with the established statistical preponderance of female participation in the Brazilian religious field. Unlike my

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<sup>3</sup> The figures for male and female participation are more or less equal for Roman Catholicism (49.5% and 50.4%, respectively), averaging out at approximately 44% male and 56% female for traditional Protestantism and neo-Pentecostalism inclusively (except for the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which has 38% males and 62% females), and are inverted (60% males and 40% females) for those recorded as “without religion” (*sem religião*) (Campos, 2004: 134).

other findings, however, the data that I acquired in this area diverge significantly from those of Bandeira et al. Of the twenty-five responses I received, seventeen (68%) were from men, and only eight (32%) were from women. This compares unfavorably with Bandeira et al.'s (1998) findings (58% female versus 42% male) and, given prevailing opinion, is the opposite of what one would expect to find.<sup>4</sup>

The lower number of women attending the seminars and participating in the Internet support group, I believe, reflects the relatively limited attraction that the IGB has for women in general, a limited attraction that results from two interrelated factors. First, the IGB accords women a relatively inferior status and function within both its organizational structures and its doctrinal content. For example, the language used throughout IGB courses portrays women in a passive/receptive light compared with an active/giving presentation of their male counterparts. Such discursive representation of women in IGB materials reflects an organizational exclusion of women from key authoritative roles in many of the most important ritual-liturgical acts of the actual IGB community. During the two seminars I attended, for example, the wives of the male instructors played a predominantly backstage domestic function (making sandwiches, coffee, etc.) while their partners occupied the front stage as both teachers and celebrants. Because men and women channel specific energies in different ways, it is said, there needs to be a corresponding division of labor in matters liturgical and sexual. The fact that this division of labor results in front stage roles and affirmative status for men and predominantly backstage roles and secondary status for women is, I think, not entirely lost on most who engage with the discursive and practical repertoires of the IGB.

Second, IGB discourse reflects a typically masculinist preoccupation with the cognitive and individualistic over the affective and relational. A discursive

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<sup>4</sup> The possibility that this inversion of the male-to-female participation ratio may be the result of some form of sampling error is, I think, undermined by four factors. First, the period in excess of three months over which the research sample was gathered constituted a sufficient time frame to ensure an acceptable degree of sample representativeness with respect to the broader universe of enquiry. Second, of the eighty-one (73.6%) members of the research sample whose e-mail addresses included a customary Brazilian given/first name, fifty-seven (70.3%) of these addresses included a definitively male appellation and twenty-four (29.6%) a categorically female one. Third, participant observation of the two three-day Easter seminars provided opportunity to count the numbers of men and women present. In the first instance, excluding myself and those running the event, only nine (22%) of the forty-one participants were female. Less well attended than the year before, the second seminar again comprised a greater number of men (nine) than women (six). Fourth, it was during the latter seminar that a male participant (also a member of the Internet support group and participant in other events) asked one of the organizers why so many more men than women were involved with FUNDASAW. While clearly perspectival in nature, the participant's question nevertheless emerges from a firsthand experience that appears to triangulate well with the evidence furnished by participant observation and nominal analysis of the research sample.

analysis of the contents of the various courses offered by the IGB, for example, shows the extent to which emphasis is placed on cognitive/intellective aspects of the self over those related to the affective/emotional. In the same vein, emphasis lies squarely on a utilitarian approach to (tantric) sex and the relationships within which such “sexual alchemy” is practiced. Here, long-term (preferably married) relationships are recommended not for reasons of shared values and meaning but because they (purportedly) serve as the best medium for the tantric sexual practices through which the spiritual evolution of the self is most efficaciously pursued. Furthermore, when asked what “religious, mystical, esoteric” groups they currently belonged to, six (26.1%) of the twenty-three valid responses replied “none,” even though cross-tabulation shows that these six individuals had been participating in the Internet support group for periods ranging from three months to two years. The refusal of 26.1% of respondents to acknowledge themselves as members of the support group might indicate an individualistic/utilitarian focus on the group as existing as a self-help resource to serve individual needs rather than a shared forum to which course recipients and practitioners of the New Gnosis belong.<sup>5</sup> This individualistic emphasis, wrapped as it is by the IGB in the language of calculating rationality, might well fail to connect with the relational and affective preoccupations of the socialized feminine (Jordan and Weedon 1995: 179–181).

The lower number of women than men involved with the IGB is therefore directly related to its organizational and discursive inability to furnish a physical and ideational space in which the practical and affective aspirations of women might be affirmed. This failure of the IGB is, however, exacerbated by the fact that the elevated socioeconomic status of the kind of women that this movement is likely to attract brings with it an enhanced set of expectations and aspirations on the part of potential female participants. The IGB thereby finds itself in a double bind, in that the women who are most likely to be drawn to the organization in the first instance are the type of women whose expectations and aspirations the IGB is most unsuited to meet.

The IGB’s inability to meet the expectations of the kind of women whose initial interest it is most likely to attract relates directly to the organizational repertoire of action it has inherited from its parent institutions of the Universal Christian Gnostic Movement. The above has demonstrated the manner and extent to which the IGB has exploited its predominantly mediated relationship with its clientele to generate a virtual impression of itself that, while not entirely reflecting this organizational repertoire, nevertheless aligns well with prevailing neo-esoteric predilections. To facilitate this virtual frame alignment, the IGB has downplayed a number of the more formalized religious characteristics it manifests

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<sup>5</sup> This individualistic approach might well have affected the aforementioned questionnaire response ratio.



as a “traditional esoteric school/initiatory society” (Magnani 2000: 29–30; Siqueira 1998). In so doing, the IGB has had to decide which elements of its received organizational repertoire it is willing to represent and which elements it is unable, because unwilling, to downplay or finesse. Along with its stridently homophobic tendencies, the IGB has proved unable or unwilling to modify its received phallogocentric value system better to align it with the expectations and aspirations of its potential female neo-esoteric participants. As a consequence, the IGB fails to attract and retain as many female participants as do other neo-esoteric organizations whose discursive representation of women is not as misaligned.

By way of conclusion, a further observation may be offered in light of the inversion of expected ratios of female-to-male participation in the IGB. As was noted above, prevailing academic opinion tends toward an established neo-esoteric profile comprising relatively young, single, white, socioeconomically privileged, nontraditional, transient, and primarily female individuals. Given the higher than expected ratio of male-to-female IGB participants, however, it might well be the case that other exceptions exist to the established statistical preponderances in prevailing neo-esoteric profiles. Just as the IGB has managed to buck female-male trends in the neo-esoteric profile, might not other groups and organizations deviate with respect to other components, such as age, skin color, or transience? Of course, only further empirical investigation will elucidate this. I hope that the above goes some way toward stimulating this further investigation, in addition to offering something of worth about one small part of a much larger whole.

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