

The Ideas of God, Good and Evil in the Refigured Yoga Practices in Metropolitan area of Buenos Aires city (Argentina)

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Summary

Yoga is a widespread therapeutic option; it is the most popular among the oriental rooted medicines, what is more, is accepted and recommended by biomedical doctors like a complementary medicine. Currently, in a context of alternatives therapies offer, yoga appears like one of the disciplines which certain individual uses at least once in their ways of health search. The variety of options, cost and modality of the practice, the appropriation and acceptance on part of dissimilar groups, the proposal of a delicate physical exercise of the body, the compatibility that users find between their system of beliefs and the proposals of this discipline with the possibility of enjoying their benefits without adopting a new life-style, has positioned the practice of yoga as a popular choice and possible way of initiation in other searches associated to the context of the New Age. In this sense, from the point of view of the social actors, yoga is understood as a medicine that include very diverse practices, from a diet to the handling of the altered states of consciousness, from the mobilization of energies through the accomplishment of asanas to a very disclosed and well-known technique as gymnastics yoga. The process of appropriation of the Eastern practices, including yoga, has implied a phenomenon of re-meaning of the main concepts and Eastern structures of thought - *aura, chakra, atman, purusha, karma, Brahma, dharma*- in terms of values, categories and western experiences of the religions and philosophical currents, those that add essential dichotomies to these conceptions like good and evil, sin

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and punishment, spiritual and material, radically transforming the Eastern knowledge. In this opportunity, our interests focuses on investigate the slight knowledge of God, Good and Evil, that emerge from such appropriation processes that cross the yoga practices, conceiving it like a totality, in the context of the alternative practices and the phenomena of New Age. The present paper is based on field work's material from extensive and open interviews to users and specialists of yoga in Buenos Aires, as well as from observation and participant observation in different yoga's centers in period 2003-2009.

Key Word: God-Good/Evil; Refigured Notions; Yoga Practices; Argentina

Introduction

The relations between the spheres of sacred and therapeutic have been a relevant issue for both anthropology and sociology, especially so during the last decades. Nowadays, thinking about the sphere of religions implies that we leave aside the rigid divisions that were once the boundaries of individual affiliations, to think about contexts in which new borders arise, where popular, massive and cult fade, tearing the narrow boundaries that used to separate different groups (Mallimaci, 1999: 84); the emergence of new forms of relating to sacredness, characterized by proposing strictly personal relations with sacredness, unmediated by institutions (De la Torre, 2006) and in which the search for health and meaning in pain are a key part of this phenomenon. Vis-à-vis this backdrop where new proposals arise and religious practices are renewed, transformed, imported and resemantized, the socio-cultural foundations of Christianity act as a platform for the creation of new, dynamic configurations that allow individuals to take parts of different philosophies and create completely new and/or redefined world-view frames.

Elections destined to choose one or another type of religious praxis or philosophy, as well as the combination strategies that can be done in the context of a broad and diverse offer, do not arise fortuitously but are the result of a set of factors, structural and contextual (Fassin, 1992), cultural, religious, social, economic, political and ethnic (Idoyaga Molina, 2002), the emergence of new ways of thinking that privilege holism and harmony (Douglas, 1998), the reach and boundaries of biomedicine in the treatment of new diseases (Laplantine, 1999) and in the subsequent search of healing and meaning of the disease.

Such instances imply processes of accepting and/or rejecting the available religious-therapeutic offer, resulting in a wide range of personal trajectories that respond to certain styles of thought (Douglas, 1998), and that have been considered –by different authors– as trajectories of consumption

(de la Torre, 2006); processes of spiritual search that express the existence of esoteric nebula (Champion, 1990) or as part of diverse searches of healing facing the treatment of the disease and infirmity (in a broad sense). Part of these trajectories involve the preference for one or several of the so-called alternative therapies (Idoyaga Molina, 2002), recently incorporated to western societies, most of them of Eastern origin. The phenomenon of the impact and diffusion of such therapies has been analyzed considering it a part of the social movements associated to the New Age (Albanese, 1990 y 92; Barroso, 1999; Carozzi, 1999; Shimazono, 1999); as the birth of new cultural industries (de la Torre, 2006); part of the emergence of alternative religions shifting from different spiritual trends, holistic techniques and heterodox therapies from diverse socio-cultural origins (Carini, 2005); answers to the quest for delicate therapies, of holistic and non-invasive nature (Douglas, 1998); therapeutic selections in accordance with definitions totally different to those proposed by the biomedical model in terms of illness etiology, health, deviations and therapeutic power (Mc Guire y Kantor, 1988), as a symptom of the construction processes of new identities, in distinctive terms and based on different medical approaches (Bordes, 2009) and as part of the therapeutic offer of an ethno-medical system (Idoyaga Molina, 2002) .

Even if the aforementioned perspectives present differences in their treatment of the matter, authors agree that the presence of therapies of Eastern or New Age origin are more and more common in the West, their offer multiplies and diversifies constantly not only amongst the most educated sectors but also among members of the medium and lower education sectors, highlighting the construction of new ways to think about health and disease that adhere a preference for delicacy, holism, harmony and a personal search of experiences related to sacredness, i.e., without mediation of religion specialists.

In the case of Argentina, alternative therapies have been appropriated in a social and cultural context traditionally linked to catholic values and beliefs, with categories that –like those of the Western philosophical currents– imply fundamental dichotomies such as ‘good and evil’, ‘sin and punishment’, ‘material and spiritual’ and ‘death and resurrection’, categories that do not exist in the Eastern philosophies that have given birth to most of the New Age practices that we have at hand in this opportunity.

We think it is important to look into the re-meanings that the notion of the catholic world-view has suffered as part of the appropriation processes of the Eastern world-views, within the framework of the New Age movement, paying special attention to the testimony of social actors that practice yoga. This election is not arbitrary, it rather responds to different criteria: 1) amongst all the Eastern origin practices that have been appropriated in the West, yoga is one of the ones with the largest impact

in urban Western societies since the beginning of the 20th century until today; 2) the central conceptions of the philosophic framework of the discipline have part not only of a remarkable re-meaning process, but they have also been appropriated by other therapeutic disciplines that arose in the context of the New Age movement and, finally 3) even if yoga has been appropriated by sector of diverse socio-economic level and unequal education levels, it has had a strong impact in the traditionally catholic sectors.

As we will observe through this study, those re-meaning processes do not imply single or parallel ways of transformation; on the contrary, they express a major diversity in the possible ways in which resemantization is possible, and a two-way street, in which Catholicism suffers the impact of alternative therapies and vice versa.

In order to undertake the present study, we based upon original material provided by different exhaustive, repeated and open interviews to individuals that, having been socialized in the context of Catholicism and recognizing themselves as Catholics, express a new perspective based on their incursion into the field of the alternative therapies, especially yoga. The field work was carried out in Buenos Aires in the period 2008-2010, having interviewed individuals with different education and income levels, being yoga and other alternative therapies the common feature that allows us to speak of a homogenous group, besides the fact that they have been socialized in a Catholic context.

Alternative therapies in Catholic contexts

The traditionally Eastern World-views corpus has been transformed due to its contact with the West, adding moral 'good and evil' logics, and the notion of a person strongly centered in the idea of individuality (Amaral 1999; Barroso, 1999). These appropriations have caused the elaboration and re-elaboration of categories that, conceived from their general philosophical frameworks, are impossible to compare, not only because of the contradictions they present but also and mainly because it would imply to compare categories that do not exist in either one. Given the complexity of the mentioned matter, and since in this opportunity we have aimed to analyze the transformations and not the original notions of each context, we will only mention those that have had a crucial role in the interviewees' reflections¹.

Beyond the noticeable differences between different World-views, it is a fact that disciplines of Eastern origin have had an impact in our societies, being involved in a process of several changes in terms of its notions, in which some of its content is resemantized in the assimilation, others are unknown and others are rejected. Next, we will present the statements of people who practice yoga,

1 On Eastern philosophies and the categories that permeate those World-views, we recommend reading Eliade (1999), Masson Oursel (1962) and Zimmer (1973).

establishing three lines for the analysis: 1) the changes in the notion of God and in the relation of the subject with the deity/ies; 2) notions regarding Good, from the moral guidelines of Catholicism to the concept of ignorance in the Eastern philosophies and, 3) the ideas in relation to evil and bad.

The concept of God

The new contexts of religiousness are defined by the plurality of the existing offer, including from the new diverse practices that arise within Catholicism, the traditional and new forms of Protestantism, comprehending also the African-American religiosities and those related to the New Age movement. In that direction, as Frigerio (2007) has noticed, several changes arose with regards to the perspective and experience of individuals in terms of the intervention of the supernatural in daily life, transforming the experience of extraordinary events in possible phenomena that are presented in a continuous and unexceptional way; facilitating communication with the Divinity, by rendering the involvement of intermediaries unnecessary, within and beyond the ritual context. Proximity in the relation with God is –along with the divine protection and filial love– one of the most outstanding and valued features in the eyes of those who practice and adhere to these new perspectives. According to this author, aspects related to the expression of affection and emotions is an extremely important variable that, as we will observe in the accounts that we will present, allows believers to make contents viable; contents that were censored or subsumed to institutions.

A crucial element of this type of synthesis is the notion that sacredness and its expressions cannot be classified and differences between each other according to the slots that the different belief systems of diverse Creeds would imply. The notion that the presence of divinity in fact exists as a unit is a feature typical to the assimilation of elements of these different traditions, as referred by the interviewees:

“It is so important to be thankful, because it is somehow a way to acknowledge your place in this universe, to thank that Universal Force – I call it Universal Force, but it could be God, Christ or Mohammed, it doesn't matter, it is a force that gives life to the universe. If you are thankful, it is always better, you practice your humility and that makes you noble and happier” (Susana)

“For example, one of the first things I learnt when I began with this (alternative therapies) is that God is not outside, he is within every one of us; there is not such a thing as destiny, and that we can choose the reality that we want to live in” (Martha)

Regarding the relation of the man with sacredness, a frequent distinction is made in the ways

Teophany is called: when it is done in a general way, it is called God, while when it refers to a specific experience of encounter through prayer or meditation, it is called Jesus. Also the character attributed to them is different: while God is associated to the mythical figure of the Old Testament –powerful, distant and ruthless in his relation with men, capable of revenge if his desires are not fulfilled–, Jesus is linked to compassion and love and is attributed a patient and caring behavior facing the requests and petitions of his followers, whatever they are related to: health, love, work, family economy or studies. The same can be said of the mythical episodes narrated to express the therapeutic efficacy of certain ritual practices, occasions in which the informants select those episodes from the biblical history that contain stories of the life of Jesus, that is, the New Testament. Likewise, from all the episodes that constitute the mythical cycle of the life of Jesus Christ (Idoyaga Molina, 2001), priority is given to those associated to the expression of joy, love and compassion to fellow human beings, while those mentioning episodes of pain and death, such as the *Via Crucis* and his crucifixion, are left aside.

Specifically, in relation to what makes ritual contexts present in these religious configurations, it is noticeable that the consecrated spaces of Catholicism are positively valued by those who practice alternative therapies, who attribute them a special energy resulting from the presence of a superior being, that may be the Catholic God, the saints, the Virgin or even other figures of Catholicism that appear to re-gain position amongst these sensibilities, as it is the case with angels and archangels. In connection with the spaces used to perform therapeutic rituals, the powerful character of Catholic deities has the capacity to transform any profane entourage in one conducive to the therapy, with the frequent joint use of figures of deities from diverse traditions in the same altar –which is not a contradiction in the social actors' perspective (Saizar, 2003)².

The concept of ignorance and the moral qualification of the acts

The notions around the qualification of the actions are in Catholicism usually defined according to a moral system distinguishing acceptable or unacceptable actions according to their appropriateness to the rules expressed in the tables of the commandments and through different teachings of the Bible. In the context of users of alternative therapies, mainly amongst those who practice yoga, actions are understood as a result of ignorance. Not only are they embedded in this conception of actions, but also of thoughts, desires, will. Although considered matter –even if one of different density and quality–, they are guided by such notion.

The term ignorance refers to, in the context of the Eastern philosophies, the state of confusion inherent to men, which makes mankind confuse the profane materiality of emotions, feelings and

2 For example, in the Hastinapura Yoga Center, –one of prestigious trajectory in Argentina- one can see altars shared by Shiva and Virgin Mary, Buddha and Child Jesus.

actions with the holy and immaterial that resides within men. This state of confusion is the origin of *mahya*, the unreality of perception in daily life. Because of this confusion, individuals are not fully aware of the actions taken or its consequences and therefore have no notion of evil, or good, or guilt to qualify their behavior. Here we find the crucial difference with the western philosophy, more precisely that of catholic tradition, that through the notion of free will imposes the moral qualification of human acts. This world-view considers men free to act, having the possibility to choose the destiny of their actions, counterbalanced with the responsibility of their actions. It also involves the possibility to become ill as a consequence of our own acts, by omission or intended action. This idea corresponds with the conception of disease as the result of the will of an anthropomorphic or anthropomorphized power – shaman, spirit, the Devil – or God, who intervenes in the form of destiny (Laplantine, 1999). These are the systems called personalist by Foster (1976).

Given the re-meaning processes and the diversity of attributions of meaning, it is also interesting to notice the differences that can be found in the reflection about these subjects made by some yoga specialists that have been educated in the most systematic and respectful manners of the East. According to them, the notion of ignorance clearly opposes that of free will, the etiology of a disease is not attributable to the moral quality of human acts and it is never referred to as the direct effect of a malicious action, own or not, since those conceptions do not exist in the Eastern world-view.

“Disease is related somewhat to karma, that is, life as learning, and within that learning, the disease, or the type of disease or the disease itself. The type of disease is related to a previous life. For example, if you have spine problems, or cancer, there was something related to that in your previous life, as life is conceived as a kind of movement forward, as overcoming. However, this is strange, because they do not have criteria for sins. The criterion is that of ignorance, a very interesting one, as if you came to learn through that disease”. (Ana)

From this viewpoint, healing is produced when one becomes aware of his own state of ignorance, when one can differentiate the materiality, both dense and subtle, of its immateriality. This is accomplished through a practice that allows humans to register their pain, becoming aware of its existence. This single fact is therapeutic and is accomplished when the individual is capable of observing his disease without identifying with it, that is, without giving in to the emotions or feelings, whether positive or negative, that it can cause. The search is to enter into the state of *mudhi* or observer, situation in which individual can perceive his pain without emotional involvement with it. According to these specialists, the practice of yoga is therapeutic in itself, since it provides humans with the necessary

techniques to achieve full material detachment and with it the completion of the wheel of incarnations to which one is tied by the karmic substance. Nevertheless, they differ with the idea of presenting yoga as a therapy that acts on the physical sphere or that allows to completely heal a disease from that sphere. What they see as therapeutic is the process of self-encounter, within the context of a daily, constant and intense practice, always guided by a specialist that supervises how the different exercises are performed, in terms of breathing, meditation or relaxation.

The notion of evil and the capacity to harm

From the perspective of people who practice yoga, individuals can affect the quality of the energetic amount of others, as a consequence of the feelings of jealousy, envy and rancor attributed to social interactions. When an individual is captured by certain negative feelings, his energy is transformed; it becomes malign and prejudicial to those in contact with him, in a way that the individual who causes such feelings suffers the consequences. Causes of such affections can be envy and jealousy caused by a family, a good job, success in business, larger incomes or good health, always assessed according to the social, cultural and economic background of individuals. The negative energy of the impairer impacts both the energetic body of the affected and the places in which the first one moves, contaminating spaces and transforming their quality.

"If someone is envious of you, or angry, and wants to harm you, wants you to fail so he can be happy. He is going to be continuously shooting negative energy and that will make you have a complicated and hard time, and, yes, you can also fall ill, if his envy is large its negative energy is very powerful. Better escape those people, they can do a lot of harm". (Alicia)

The impact of the damage is related to the magnitude of the negative feeling and the power that the impairer has to control his energy. The fact alone of possessing negative feelings modifies the individual's energetic quality, transforming him in a potential risk for the health and well-being of those who are object of such emotions, potential that is magnified when the existence of them and the power of manipulating energy are combined (Sazair, 2009). The way to prevent damage is to build an 'energetic coat', an energetic barrier that prevents the access of negative energies and enables one to stay away from harmful influences. This coat is constructed through the state of meditation, usually involving the help of a deity that provides protection. However, if who has harmful intentions is a powerful being, barriers cannot prevent the access of negative energy and their dire impact on the aura. In the unbalance of powers between victim and doer, damage is inevitable.

Energy is an essential asset for this perspective. It requires a minimum of energy to sustain

existence, a harmonic flow to maintain health and a larger flow to become someone of power³. Since it can be manipulated, it can be subtracted or added, depending on the goal. Another possibility is that the individual that wishes to acquire energy to increase his energetic flow and therefore have more power, he can manipulate the energy of other whom he steals it from. Juliana, 61 years old, self-taught specialist in yoga and reiki, describes a powerful individual in the following way:

“Energy is powerful when one has a lot, because with a common amount you are a normal person. The development of that energy has to do with meditation, control of breath, meaning it is acquired through practice. That is the good, positive way to obtain it. There is another way to obtain it, with less effort, the evil way. It is to steal energy from others. You visualize them and lock them in a bell jar, and all the energy from the aura shining around them, you attract it to you. But this harms the person you steal from, it doesn't work that way, I take it from them and use it for me, and that's it”.

In other cases, when an individual seeks to harm another, he can carry out a series of practices that allow him to affect the quality and quantity of energy they wish to harm. That can extract energy or add negative energies to the victim's total amount, causing disease or even death. In those situations, it is not necessary to have direct contact with the victim, since energy can be manipulated through different actions on his belongings or through the visualization of the victim's figure.

The efficacy of the energetic deeds is based on the belief that the energy enters to the human body, materialized in the shape of harmful cumulus. The criterion of the ‘distortion’ of the general energy implies that the positive energy that is constantly in the atmosphere is altered when it connects with the negative feelings existing in every human. In the accounts, we find the idea that energy, once it is transformed from a positive into a negative sign, it can be transmitted intentionally or unintentionally. The difference in the power of the damage would be determined by two factors. The first one, the power developed by who intends evil actions, meaning, his capacity to intentionally manipulate that energy towards others. In the second place, the amount of people that gather and connect mentally to undertake such negative manipulation largely defines the magnitude of the damage. Despite the fear that users express facing the power they could acquire as a result of the practice of meditation and the subsequent increase of energy, interviewees refer to this condition as one of value, but it should be concentrated in the figure of a specialist whose moral quality is not to be doubted. In other words, knowledge and the conscious use of certain energies should be handled by those who possess a higher degree of training in the discipline and can use that knowledge to help rather than harm others.

3 Mc Guire y Kantor (1988: 116) underline the constant reference made by users of therapies based in Eastern traditions of energy and its manipulation in the therapeutic process.

Conclusions

In the context of an ever growing and diversifying therapeutic and religious offer, we have tried to describe a specific sphere of overlap, as the one configured around the relation of humans and sacredness, the re-meanings around the idea of ignorance and the attributions of morality in traditionally Catholic social settings that currently adhere to alternative practices in the framework of the New Age. In that direction, the analysis proposed allowed for the distinction between those ideas that were part of the construction of Catholicism and are now accepted, rejected or reconfigured in the process of the construction of new identities, as the result of the adhesion to new belief systems. We observe that the re-meaning process accentuates in those notions made to the entities of the person and the valuation of the acts, those that noticeably differ between the catholic and the Eastern traditions. So, on one side, the ideas of material and immaterial substance vis-à-vis those of body and soul, the moral connotation of the acts and the energy versus an idea of ignorance of the *dharma*, are presented as the main notions around which the larger re-meanings occur.

We observe that alternative therapies have a high degree of flexibility to assimilate religious world-views, allowing them to re-mean the notions and experiences rooted in the diverse Catholicisms present in the area. In that direction, the set of beliefs in which alternative therapies are inserted provides the subjects the possibility to adhere to new practices and assume new perspectives without implying to leave or reject the previous life guidelines and its relation with sacredness. Likewise, we also observed that adherence to these new practices does not contradict the previous ones, in which the subjects were socialized; on the contrary, many times it allows them to rescue ancient experiences of their passing through the catholic religion, lived in a negative way then, positively refigured under a new perspective.

Alternative therapies posit a direct relation of humans with deities, who can belong to different pantheons and religious systems and nevertheless live without contradictions in the experience of the numinous; health and disease are to notions strongly permeated by emotional content that has not much biological basis. Regarding therapeutic forms, those considered effective are those who demand for the commitment of the sufferer with his recovery -understood as the possibility to know the real causes of the disease and the assumption of new behaviors. Likewise, all therapeutic actions are related to the field of sacredness, performed in ritual contexts or not. This essence of sacredness has its base on the manipulation of individual and universal energy, expressed as generalized power. In the opposite direction, catholic religion proposes the form of the relation God/human to be mediated by the institution Church, establishing moral criteria that clearly distinguish the quality of the actions according to intention and adequacy of the rules set by the deity and preaching the worship of the only

true God.

Finally, while in the context of Catholicism the notions of personal sacrifice, poverty, guilt by sin, punishment as redemption and acceptance of the pain and disease are presented as means of redemption and exculpation of the sins, ways to salvation and approaching God and the accomplishment of eternal life, the philosophical frameworks of alternative therapies require a much more active role of the individual, in which disease appears as an expression of the mistakes made by ignorance –willing or unwillingly–, in which pain is not something desirable or acceptable, and in which individuals are responsible for the overcoming of the conditions of poverty, something accomplished by means of personal growth and development. In this sense, the importance of the ‘here and now’ is typical of alternative therapies, while for Catholicism life on earth is nothing but ‘waiting for what will come’.

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