

ASHGATE NEW CRITICAL THINKING IN RELIGION, THEOLOGY AND
BIBLICAL STUDIES

The *Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies* series brings high quality research monograph publishing back into focus for authors, international libraries, and student, academic and research readers. Headed by an international editorial advisory board of acclaimed scholars spanning the breadth of religious studies, theology and biblical studies, this open-ended monograph series presents cutting-edge research from both established and new authors in the field. With specialist focus yet clear contextual presentation of contemporary research, books in the series take research into important new directions and open the field to new critical debate within the discipline, in areas of related study, and in key areas for contemporary society.

Series Editorial Board:

Jeff Astley, North of England Institute for Christian Education, Durham, UK
David Jasper, University of Glasgow, UK
James Beckford, University of Warwick, UK
Raymond Williams, Wabash College, Crawfordsville, USA
Geoffrey Samuel, University of Newcastle, Australia
Richard Hutch, University of Queensland, Australia
Paul Fiddes, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, UK
Anthony Thiselton, University of Nottingham, UK
Tim Gorringe, University of Exeter, UK
Adrian Thatcher, College of St Mark and St John, UK
Alan Torrance, University of St Andrews, UK
Terrance Tilley, University of Dayton, USA
Miroslav Volf, Yale Divinity School, USA
Stanley Grenz, Baylor University and Truett Seminary, USA
Vincent Brummer, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands
Gerhard Sauter, University of Bonn, Germany

Other titles in this series:

Tantric Buddhism and Altered States of Consciousness
Durkheim, Emotional Energy and Visions of the Consort
Louise Child

The Politics of Praise
Naming God and Friendship in Aquinas and Derrida
William W. Young III

The Trinity and Ecumenical Church Thought
The Church-Event
William C. Ingle-Gillis

New Era – New Religions

Religious Transformation in Contemporary Brazil

ANDREW DAWSON
Lancaster University, UK

2007
ASHGATE

Valley of the Dawn

The 'Valley of the Dawn' (*Vale do Amanhecer*) is located approximately 40 kilometres from Brasília and was founded in 1969 by Neiva Zelaya Chaves (1925–85). Attracted by the prospect of regular employment, the recently widowed Chaves travelled with her four children from the northeast to Brasília in 1957. It was soon after this time that official narratives record Tia Neiva ('Aunt Neiva', as she came to be known) as beginning to experience a series of mediumistic visions and visitations, in addition to transporting her consciousness to other 'vibrational planes' and parts of the globe to be instructed in the ways of the Masters (Sassi, 1979: 3). These psychical experiences culminated with Tia Neiva being charged by the spirit of an Amerindian chief (Pai Seta Branca) to found a religious community in which a religion fit for the third millennium might be practised.⁴ Subsequent to a number of abortive attempts, Tia Neiva and her followers settled upon the farmstead of Mestre D'Armas, five kilometres from the satellite town of Planaltina. No more than a few thousand in number at the time of her death, the Valley of the Dawn is now inhabited by over twenty thousand people subsequent to the selling of plots of land to non-members of the religious community. The movement centred upon the Valley claims over 250 affiliated temples and is (perhaps over generously) estimated to have approximately 450,000 adepts throughout Brazil (M. Martins, 1999).

The Valley of the Dawn defines itself as a 'Christian Spiritualist Order' (*Ordem Espiritualista Cristã*) which 'translates the transcendent heritages of various ancient peoples – Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Mayas, Incas, Nagôs, Gypsies – along with

⁴ Pai Seta Branca means 'Father White Arrow' and is the name given to one of the principal spirits of Umbanda. As well as being a term of respect, use of the word 'Father' has hybrid connotations related both with Catholic clergy and aged black slaves.

an original culture brought by Pai Seta Branca; an Inca chief who lived with his tribe in the vicinity of the Bolivia–Peru border during the time of the Spanish conquest' (<www.valedoamanhecer.com>). Pai Seta Branca was the final incarnation of an evolved spirit whose task it is to aid humanity through the impending crisis brought on by the cyclical civilizational transition that takes place upon the earth every two millennia. Upon completing his own evolutionary journey and thereby no longer in need of further incarnations, Pai Seta Branca chose Tia Neiva as his earthly representative responsible for the foundation of a religious community able to support humanity through the calamitous times ahead. In order to aid Tia Neiva and the community founded by her, Seta Branca has enabled the gathering of a 'phalanx' of approximately 30,000 spirits to serve and watch over the Valley of the Dawn, its mediums, and supplicants. The most evolved of this phalanx of spirits are said to reside in the Morning Star from where they descend to be incorporated by the Valley's mediums (Cavalcante, 2002).

The origins of the most important 'spirits of light' that serve Tia Neiva's community lie beyond our own solar system. Some 32,000 years ago, it is said, a fleet of spacecraft arrived from the planet *Capela* (Chapel) bearing an alien race. Upon arriving on earth and settling in the Andean region of South America this alien race transformed itself into a race known as the 'Equitumans'. The terrestrial dominance of the Equitumans, however, lasted little more than two thousand years and was brought to an abrupt halt by the cataclysmic events provoked by the arrival of a large space craft piloted by the spirit who would later be known as Pai Seta Branca. Subsequent to this civilizational transition planetary dominance passed to a race known as the 'Tumuchys' who colonized the rest of the earth under the guidance of Pai Seta Branca. Scientific in disposition, the Tumuchy race used its advanced technological skills to design and build the structures and pyramids found today throughout Egypt, the Middle East, the Orient, the South Pacific islands, and South America. Tumuchy dominance lasted approximately five thousand years until the ascent of the race known as 'Jaguars' (*juaguares*). Based in the Andean region but greater in number than the remnants of the Equituman and Tumuchy races, the Jaguar race subsequently gave rise to many of the great civilizations recorded in human history. Upon evolving through their consecutive incarnations as Equituman, Tumuchy, and Jaguar many of the higher spirits who today serve the Valley of the Dawn passed on to humanity and appear through human history as its principal movers and shakers. Before incarnating as the Amerindian chief Seta Branca, for example, the Valley of the Dawn's guardian spirit was incarnated as an interplanetary grand master, Tumuchy leader, Jaguar chief, Egyptian pharaoh, and Saint Francis of Assisi. In addition to Pai Seta Branca, the Valley of the Dawn calls upon a number of highly evolved spirits, among which, for example, are those last incarnated as African slaves, Amerindian princesses, Portuguese colonists, and prominent Spiritists (e.g. Pai João, Pai José Pedro, Princesas, Mãe Yara, and Dr Fritz). Representatives of the Valley of the Dawn maintain that over the course of the past five hundred years these spirits have been converging upon South America and particularly Brazil by way of their incarnation through indigenous inhabitants of the Amazonian basin, Portuguese and Spanish colonists, Africans forcibly transported as slaves, and latterly those from other parts of the world arriving as immigrants. Mirrored by the organizational

structures of the Valley's functionaries, these spirits are regimented into different phalanges relative to their last incarnation and the personality they adopt upon being incorporated by their respective mediums.

The religious compound of the Valley of the Dawn is as eclectic as its cosmological framework. Upon entering the site one is immediately struck by the novelty of its architecture and the vibrancy of its colour schemes. Excluding administrative and ancillary buildings, the religious compound is split into two main sections. The area accessed upon entering the compound itself houses the main ritual building which has been constructed with an east-facing entrance and the external appearance of an Amerindian temple. Immediately in front of the main temple an open square contains a stone six-pointed Star of Solomon (a popular esoteric symbol) pierced by the white arrow of Seta Branca and inscribed with one of his many aphorisms. A few metres to the north of the star stands a large concrete and brightly coloured sun. Sculptural representations of the sun, along with those of the moon and stars are scattered throughout the Valley complex and point to the influence of indigenous cosmologies for which astral bodies have a high level of significance. In between sun and star stand a four metres-high statue of Jesus and an ellipse stood on its long axis. The ellipse contains a white arrow pointing from the sky downward towards some stars and a moon. Regarded by Valley adepts as a new religious symbol for a new era, the ellipse represents the combination of practice and knowledge in the service of healing. Whilst there are a number of crosses located at various points on the site, this Christian symbol is held to represent the suffering endured by all incarnated spirits as they pass through this world of moral-spiritual expiation. Adjoining the southern side of the temple a court room has been erected complete with judgement seat, dock, jury benches, and public viewing area. This structure is used to conduct trials of spirits who are brought to the court room by the Valley's mediums. Here, spirits are given opportunity to defend, make their case or (more often than not) confess their guilt in the face of prosecution arguments as to their moral-spiritual culpability and low evolutionary status. Sentences laid down by the court are carried out at the hands of mediums of indoctrination and the spirits of light watching over the Valley.

The other part of the religious compound is an open air complex (*Solar dos Médiuns*) a few hundred metres from the main temple and its adjoining buildings. The eastern end of this open air complex comprises a medium sized lake known as the 'Lake of the Princesses' (*lago das princessas*). A number of structures of indigenous, Egyptian, and Graeco-Roman inspiration dot the northern and southern banks of the lake and a large ellipse stands at its centre. The ritual heart of the open air complex is situated at the far western end of the lake and is known as the 'Burning Star' (*estrela candente*). Constructed in the shape of a Star of Solomon, this area is the site of daily rituals at which adepts of the Valley gather to incorporate and counsel spirits in need of cure and guidance. Known as 'Consecration', the main ritual involves a pair of mediums (one of the sun and one of the moon) facilitating the transition of spirits from lower to higher spiritual planes through the 'manipulation' and channelling of cosmic energies. In addition to the Burning Star, the western end of the lake houses a waterfall, oracle, and large statue of Tia Neiva. Further to the west a large ellipse has been erected on a hill and is visible from all parts of the Valley.

Although ritual activity takes place daily at the open air complex and throughout the streets immediately surrounding the Valley compound, the stone temple is the cultic heart of the *Vale do Amanhecer*.⁵ The temple is approximately 100 metres in length (from east to west) and 60 metres wide and is entered through an east-facing doorway. Of stone construction on the outside, the internal fixtures of the temple are predominantly of concrete which is painted a variety of vivid colours and softened by a generous use of fabrics, hangings, and upholstery which is likewise rich in colour. Increasingly common through the neo-esoteric popularization of chromotherapy, the use of vibrant colours as a means of generating and channelling positive cosmic energies has long been an established practice in traditional esoteric and Spiritist circles. Around the southern edge of the temple are a number of spaces reserved for Valley functionaries, the most ritually central of which are the mediums (of incorporation and indoctrination) directly involved in cultic activities and those (directors) who oversee matters from the sidelines. The northern perimeters of the temple space are occupied by a series of rooms used by clients (*clientes*) on a private basis (e.g. prayer room) or when undergoing certain forms of treatment (e.g. *passé*). At the eastern end of the temple floor nearest the doorway stand two concrete operating tables which are used for the performance of non-invasive mediumistic surgery. Positioned further within the temple is a large triangular table (*mesa evangélica*) around which mediums of incorporation sit with mediums of indoctrination standing behind them. Watched by clients sat on viewing benches to the south of the table, mediumistic activity takes place in which spirits are incorporated by those who are seated and indoctrinated by those who are standing. Throughout these mediumistic sessions there is a great deal of physical and verbal agitation as incorporating mediums wave their arms whilst rocking to and fro and speaking loudly in often unintelligible guttural utterances. The mediums of indoctrination struggle to be heard above this commotion as they ask their questions and bark instructions at the incorporated spirit.

Moving further to the west, a large statue of Jesus and altar to the spirits separates the triangular Evangelical Table from the red and yellow banks of 'thrones' (*tronos*). It is here that Valley clientele are formally integrated within surrounding cultic activities. Upon first arriving at the temple, clients are directed to a series of benches just inside the doorway before undergoing a preliminary triage in which their particular issues and problems are identified. After the initial triage clients may then be led to the throne area at which further consultation (*consulta*) takes place by way of mediumistic activity. Each throne comprises a stone bench just big enough to sit two people; the client and a medium of incorporation (known more commonly as an *apará*). A medium of indoctrination (*doutrinador*) stands immediately behind

5 Groups of mediums leave the religious compound at regular intervals to conduct mediumistic sessions in the streets immediately surrounding the complex. Gathered in a circle composed of approximately eight mediums, these groups serve to tend and reinforce the vibratory fields surrounding the religious compound. Whether returning to the compound after one of these sessions or standing around the complex subsequent to a shift in the temple, Valley mediums can be seen feverishly transcribing or animatedly discussing visions and communications received during their mediumistic trances.

the now seated incorporating medium who after some preliminary chat sets about communicating with the spirit world to establish the precise cause of the client's illness or misfortune. Whilst not as expansive as the gestures and utterances enacted around the *mesa evangélica*, the actions of the medium who invokes and subsequently incorporates the spirits remain distinctly performative in nature. At times the incorporating medium holds the client's hands or touches various parts of her anatomy and at other points no contact is made. Throughout the period of incorporation the medium of indoctrination offers encouragement and clarification to the client whilst channelling cosmic energies in support of the semi-conscious incorporating medium. At the same time, the indoctrinating medium engages with any spirits drawn from the client by the incorporated spirit working through the incorporating medium.

Immediately to the west of the throne area is an altar to Pai Seta Branca, the centrepiece of which is a large statue of the spirit himself. Behind the altar and screened off from the rest of the temple is a space reserved for the healing (*cura*) of clients. Subsequent to triage and consultation, for example, clients may be taken to this area for further intensive treatment for their ill-health and misfortunes. The cure room is furnished with a suite of platforms upon which patients can recline or sit whilst receiving a range of therapeutic treatments from attendant mediums. The removal (*desobsessão*) of immature or malevolent spirits is the most common form of treatment practised here, although other causes such as bad karma from previous incarnations or moral impropriety in this life may also require concentrated attention. Other rooms situated along the northern edge of the temple provide further space in which less intensive and longer term curative techniques might be undertaken by or practised upon the client. The cure room itself leads to the westernmost point of the temple which comprises a central space used for the initiation of mediums. The space in which initiation takes place is flanked by rooms in which *aparás* and *doutrinadores* are prepared prior to their initiation.

Perhaps nowhere are the hybridizing tendencies of neo-esoteric repertoires more evident than the Valley of the Dawn. Cosmologically, architecturally, and practically, the Valley of the Dawn is a unique blend of indigenous spirituality, ancient near-eastern and classical themes, traditional European esotericism, popular Catholic religiosity, Brazilian Spiritism, Afro-Brazilian practices, oriental concepts, and new age preoccupations. From the waterfall, astral bodies, and temple, through the oracle and pyramid, to the cross, Star of Solomon and white arrow, religious iconography has been culled from many of the world's religious-spiritual traditions. Articulated through a mind-bogglingly abstruse cosmological system and enacted through a cure-centred practical repertoire, the neo-esotericism of the Valley of the Dawn is a conspicuously hybrid form. The Valley's hybridization of multiple sources is further evidenced through the dress of its qualified mediums. Excluding minor differences relative to seniority, function, and phalanx membership, the standard garb of male mediums includes a dark shirt, white waistcoat, and sash. Over this is draped a long cape stereotypical of nineteenth-century aristocrats and adopted by adepts of European esotericism. Shirt, waistcoat, sash, and cape are heavily decorated with colourful emblems such as a Christian cross, Bible, and jaguar head. Fully qualified female mediums sport an even more colourful and eccentric mode of dress than

their male counterparts.⁶ Again allowing for individual variations, female mediums are generally bedecked in brightly coloured flowing dresses, scarves, headpieces, and elbow high gloves. Jewellery adorning the ears, neck, and head of the medium combines with her clothing to present the stereotypical appearance of a Romany Gypsy or fairytale princess.⁷

As with other new era groups and organizations, the Valley's conspicuous appropriation of disparate sources is rationalized through an appeal to holism which relativizes their apparent incongruity. If all religions and cultures are but particular historical-geographical manifestations of overarching universal realities, the argument goes, they are but different expressions of one and the same thing. According to Mário Sassi, a First Tumuchy Sun Master, 'the Valley's Doctrine is not Umbanda, Candomblé, Quimbanda, Kardecism, Hinduism, Theosophy or Catholicism. Rather, it is a Doctrine in a universal sense, with its base in the Christic System' (1979: 16). Given the underlying unity within one and the same holistic reality (here, the 'Christic System'), the actual provenance of particular concepts, icons or practices is of no abiding consequence. The absolute transcendent truth is what matters, not its relative historical-cultural expression.

Together, the site's architecture, dress of its mediums, ritual practices, and conceptual system combine to give the Valley of the Dawn a theatrical quality which borders on the playful. The ludic nature of the Valley's repertoire is further reinforced through an individualized rhetoric typical of new era groups and organizations. 'Truth is perceived *individually*, by each person' is a sentiment reflective of late-modern conceptualizations of the self as the ultimate arbiter of what is right or wrong (Sassi, 1979: 2). Of course, the individualism pervading the Valley's rhetoric is grounded in the long established clientelism of popular religion in Brazil. Whether traditional Catholic, Spiritist or Afro-Brazilian, popular religious repertoires have long been imbued with a pragmatism which relativizes the fixity of client-practitioner relationships. At the same time, however, the punctual nature of client-practitioner relations has been further attenuated by the confluence of a number of late-modern dynamics such as individualization and globalization. Both established and contemporary, hybridizing processes and individualizing forces combine to engender a highly fluid dynamic characteristic of new era repertoires and their participants.

Like many new era contexts, the Valley of the Dawn is a highly inventive and fluid place in which the notion of tradition is important discursively yet less influential in actuality. Whilst Tia Neiva's legacy is regarded, in theory, as sacrosanct, the contemporary dynamics of invention, experimentation, and hybridization conspire towards an ever more complex and heterodox repertoire. The complexification and growing heterodoxy of its repertoire is perhaps behind Carvalho's exasperation

6 The dress of trainee mediums, known as 'neophytes', is plainer than their qualified counterparts, with female neophytes wearing a white dress similar to that worn at popular Catholic festivals.

7 The princess motif is generally understood as a representation of indigenous heritage, whilst gypsy and other motifs (e.g. masters and *senhores*) both celebrate European traditions and reflect the ingression of esoteric influences.

in stating that 'I know of no one to date, even among those who have been there various times, who has been able to understand the belief system of the Valley of the Dawn' (1992: 156). In certain respects, the Valley of the Dawn's juxtaposition of abstruse cosmology and pragmatically orientated spirit-centred cure is similar in kind to the practical–discursive relationships in Afro-Brazilian religions. Umbanda, for example, has an extremely complex cosmological system which only a few specialist practitioners fully comprehend. The overwhelming majority of Umbanda adepts only ever experience a practical point of access which is accompanied by a greatly simplified conceptual rationale. This is true also of the Valley of the Dawn, whose clients are driven by a pragmatic motivation to end their suffering or improve their fortunes rather than a desire to revel in the theoretical intricacies of its discursive repertoire. As with the material fabric of the compound, however, the Valley's already syncretistic discourse has progressively acquired a great many more accretions as its innate hybridizing tendencies have been radicalized under late-modern conditions. Typical of many new era organizations in Brazil, the Valley of the Dawn is conspicuously promiscuous in its appropriation of otherwise disparate sources which are inserted within a rapidly burgeoning conceptual system. Unwieldy in scope and lacking systematic integration, the Valley's conceptual repertoire contrasts with the relatively straightforward practical interface between client and medium.

Gnostic Church of Brazil

The 'Gnostic Church of Brazil' (*Igreja Gnóstica do Brasil*) is based in Curitiba, the capital of the southern state of Paraná, and is an independent offshoot of the 'Universal Christian Gnostic Movement of Brazil' founded in São Paulo in 1972.⁸ The Universal Christian Gnostic Movement of Brazil was founded on the back of missionary activity by representatives of the 'Universal Christian Gnostic Church'. Legally established in Mexico in 1976, but functioning institutionally for many years prior, the Universal Christian Gnostic Church is part of a broader movement founded by Samael Aun Weor (1917–77). The organizational repertoire of the Gnostic Church of Brazil is centred upon the veneration of Weor and adherence to his teaching which is known as 'New Gnosis'. The man later known as 'Bodhisattva of the Venerable Master Samael Aun Weor' was born Víctor Manuel Gómez Rodríguez on 6 March 1917, in Santa Fé de Bogotá, Colombia (Zoccatelli, 2000: 33–48). According to insider accounts Rodríguez was a precocious child who by twelve years of age had already passed through dozens of esoteric and Spiritist schools in an insatiable quest for an understanding of the deepest truths of the universe. Emic accounts also record Weor's ability to transform himself into a number of animals (an ability typical of powerful shamans) and to transport himself physically or in spirit to different spatial and temporal dimensions (a skill typical of esoteric masters). It was not until Rodríguez encountered in the mid-1940s the German-born Arnold Krumm-Heller

⁸ The adjective 'gnostic' derives from the Greek noun *gnosis* (equivalent of the Latin *scientia*) which means 'knowledge' or 'learning'. Used within neo-esoteric circles, the term denotes the possession of a body of knowledge unavailable to the uninitiated.