

Kardecism

"Kardecism" refers to various traditions rooted in nineteenth-century French spiritism. In 1853-1854—impacted by American spiritualism, which began in 1848—France experienced an explosion of interest in séances as a technique for conversing with departed souls. The emergence of Kardecist spiritism as a distinct tradition was marked by the 1857 publication of *The Book of the Spirits* by Allan Kardec (Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, 1804-1869). Kardec's works—along with later influential publications by Léon Denis (1846-1927), Gabriel Delanne (1857-1926), and others—produced a moderately systematised theoretical frame for these phenomena, based in alleged transcriptions of messages received from highly-evolved, disincarnate spirits. The dramatic impact of *spiritisme* across social classes in late-nineteenth-century France resonated with other religious and intellectual developments of the time: in Catholicism, a pious upsurge of interest in angels, purgatory, and Marian apparitions; in esotericism, an emphasis on empirical study, e.g., Eliphas Lévi (1810-1875); in the emerging field of psychiatry, an interest in the interiority of the psyche; and ideas of science, progress, and social reform (Engler and Isaia 2016; see Sharp 2006; Monroe 2008). (It is said that Kardec was a Freemason—e.g., Guénon 1972 [1923], 37—but this question remains unresolved [Lefraisse and Monteiro 2007].) These points of resonance, especially with Catholicism and progressivism, shaped the reception of Kardecist spiritism in other countries, most significantly in Latin America, where it arrived in the 1860s.

The core ideas of Kardec's books form the doctrinal core of Kardecist spiritisms around the world today: *equality* (all humans are spirits, created equal, and all spirits are disincarnate humans); *progress and evolution* (God created all spirits in a state of ignorance with the goal of spiritual progress through repeated incarnations on this and other worlds); *meritocratic hierarchy* (vulgar spirits are ignorant and driven by distracting emotions; intermediate spirits seek their spiritual progress; and pure, perfected spirits who need no further incarnation—Jesus foremost—assist in God's plan, in part through working through

mediums to charitably aid those still on the path of expiation); *autonomy and personal responsibility* (spirit possession is not possible, as each spirit is inseparably linked to its body while incarnate; but similarities of sentiment between incarnate and discarnate spirits explain certain human differences—some people are hampered by vulgar spirits who reflect and amplify their own limitations, where others progress more rapidly on their spiritual path through resonance with more highly-evolved spirits); and *social embeddedness* (maintaining relationships with loved ones after death and over many incarnations). Critics noted the parallels with Kardec's own intellectual positioning: René Guénon, for example, argued that Kardecist mediums "were so many writing machines, slavishly reproducing [Kardec's] own thoughts" (1972 [1923], 34).

It is important to distinguish Spiritualism, with its pragmatic emphasis on communication beyond the grave, from Kardecist spiritism, with its more robust conceptual framework. A further important distinction is that between European Kardecism, including its transplants abroad, and the varied and vibrant spiritisms of Latin America, the latter distinguished by a greater emphasis on healing and a tendency to hybridise with other traditions. That said, this distinction is blurred by Brazilian influences feeding back into overseas groups. National groups in Europe consist of from hundreds to a few thousand members: e.g., French *spiritisme*, Italian *spiritismo*, British spiritism, Finnish *spiritismi*, Romanian *spiritismul*, Spanish *espiritismo*, and others; there are groups in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA (Aubrée and Laplantine 1990, 289-331; L'Institut Français n.d.; CESNUR 2017; Spiritist Group n.d.).

Latin American variants make up a complex spectrum. At one end is orthodox *Kardecismo* (Port.) or *Kardecianismo* (Span.), found throughout Latin America and much of the Caribbean. Kardecists, with their adherence to the doctrines of the classic French texts, tend to call their tradition a philosophy and a science, rejecting the label "religion". This has been changing in Brazil, which has the world's largest population of Kardecists. This shift reflects an explicit recommendation by the President of the Brazilian Spiritist Federation, and it accounts in part for the rising number of Brazilians reporting Kardecism as their religion on the national census, from 1.3% in 2000 (2.3 million) to 2% in 2010 (3.8 million) (Lewgoy 2013, 196-198; Mariano 2013, 122). In addition, millions of non-members,

primarily Catholics, attend Kardecist rituals, especially in Brazil.

Ranging toward the other end of this spectrum are a wealth of hybrid spiritisms and new religious movements, in which Kardecist ideas and practices converge with those of indigenous, Afro-American (in the hemispheric sense), popular and esoteric groups, often resonating with elements of popular (colonial Iberian) Catholicism, including emphases on healing and the centrality of patron and local saints. The arrival of Kardecism in Cuba in the 1860s, for example, soon led to a variety of Spiritisms, primarily the more inclusive *Espiritismo cruzado*, "crossed" with Afro-Cuban traditions, and the more exclusive and Kardecist *Espiritismo científico* (Palmié 2002; Román 2007; Espirito Santo 2010).

Here are five examples of Kardecism's hybridisation in Latin America. (1) Spanish Kardecist, Joaquín Trincado Mateo (1866-1935), moved to Buenos Aires in 1903 where he founded, in 1911, the Escuela Magnético-Espiritual de la Comuna Universal (E.M.E. de la C.U.—"Magnetic-Spiritual School of the Universal Commune"), combining Kardecist and Theosophical ideas. Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto César Sandino (1895-1934) joined the group in Mexico, and it had "a profound and lasting impact on his life, thought, and strategy" (Navarro-Génie 2002, 80). (2) Umbanda began in the large cities of southern Brazil in the 1920s as a mixture of Kardecism and the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, along with symbolic indigenous elements; it has an internal spectrum of forms of belief and practice that range from Candomblé-like to centers of "white Umbanda" that overlap with Kardecism; and it has developed explicitly esoteric forms as well as influencing other movements like Santo Daime (Hale 2009; Engler 2016; Dawson 2012). (3) In Brasília, the "Temple" of the Legião da Boa Vontade (Legion of Good Will), with its associated Religião de Deus (Religion of God), presents Kardec as just one source of revelation in an "unrestricted ecumenism" that includes many esoteric and New Age elements (Dawson 2016 [2007], 45-48). (4) A leading Kardecist, Waldo Vieira (1932-2015)—who worked closely with Brazil's most famous and prolific Kardecist author/medium, Chico Xavier (1910-2002)—left the religion in the late 1960s and founded Conscientiology (first called Protectiology) in 1988. Conscientiology cultivates out-of-body experiences, mixing Kardecist and New Age ideas (D'Andrea 2013). (5) The Maria Lionza religion in Venezuela combines indigenous and Kardecist beliefs (Placido 2001). Kardecism's presence in new

hybrid traditions is of course not limited to Latin America: it was, for example, one of the influences in the emergence of Caodai in early-twentieth-century Vietnam, along with Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity and Islam (Oliver 1976, 29-32).

Given this complexity, it is useful to refer to the full spectrum of related traditions as "Spiritism" (as is commonly done in Latin America) reserving "Kardecism" for the orthodox extreme rooted in Kardec's texts. This distinction is sometimes of little import for practitioners. Similar to Cuba, Puerto Rican *Espiritismo* includes two overlapping traditions with divergent sets of spirits: *Mesa Blanca* ("white table") grounded in Kardec's texts, and Yoruba-rooted Santería (Harwood 1977a, 1977b). In other cases, the boundaries between groups are sharper. For example, an earlier president of the Mexican National Spiritist Centre, writing as a '*kardeciano*', affirmed that spiritism is rooted in Kardec's texts and argued that it is a scientific, philosophical, and moral system, not a religion (Alvarez y Gasca 1975). The insistence of Mexican *kardecianos* on this doctrinal purity reflects in part attempts to distinguish themselves from a broad range of *espiritualista* groups in Mexico, including theosophical and indigenous-influenced traditions. Perhaps the most influential is *Espiritualismo trinitario mariano* (Marian Trinitarian Spiritism), founded in 1866 by Roque Rojas Esparza (1812-1879), the "Mexican messiah" (Echániz 1990). It mixes indigenous and Catholic elements, with a core focus on healing; many of its various member groups have been influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by Kardecism. In the 2000 census, 60 657 people (0.07% of the Mexican population, with members in all states) self-identified as *espiritualistas* of this type (Garma 2007, 102).

Considering Latin American Kardecism as one end of a spectrum of spiritisms has the further advantage of highlighting the greater centrality of healing, as compared to European Kardecism. The rituals of Brazilian Kardecism illustrate this shift (Engler and Isaia 2016). As in French *spiritisme*, the most visible ritual is the study and expert elaboration of Kardec's and other classic texts; and, less publically, trained mediums work—often through automatic writing—with highly evolved spirits who both give spiritual advice and bring messages from recently disincarnated spirits. Unlike European Kardecism, something close to exorcism occurs in the case of "obsession": confused or malicious spirits can cause "perturbation", ranging from mild emotional disturbance (easily

handled with some training as a medium) through "fascination" (serious distortions of thought not recognised to be caused by a spirit) to "subjugation" (in which the spirit largely deprives their victim of autonomy). The cure is ritual "disobsession", which involves treating both the victim and the offending spirit, helping the latter to understand that their negative actions hinder their own spiritual development.

Brazilian spiritisms include various healing traditions. Mediums perform psychic surgery (Greenfield 2008). Centers of White Umbanda offer a variety of healing rituals, from exorcisms to crystal therapy (Engler 2016). The "mother temple" of Vale do Amanhecer (Valley of the Dawn)—founded in 1959 by Neiva Chaves Zelaya (1925-1985), with many core beliefs and rituals drawn from Kardecism—has become a stop on international spiritual healing tours (Siqueira 2016 [2013]; Pierini 2016). The ideas and practices of the internationally famous spiritual healer, John of God (João Teixeira de Faria, 1942-), are firmly rooted in Kardecism (Rocha 2017).

Spiritisms are increasingly transnational: e.g., Umbanda in Uruguay, Argentina, Europe, and North America; Vale do Amanhecer in the USA, Europe, and Japan; a growing international network of Conscientiology/Projectiology groups; and the John of God Movement in New Zealand and Australia (Rocha and Vásquez 2013). Kardecism has grown significantly among Brazilian emigrant communities, led by the growing international impact of media-savvy leaders like Divaldo Franco (1927-) and Luiz Antonio Gasparetto (1949-) (Lewgoy 2011). This increasing transnationalisation of Kardecism reflects a shift "from Spiritism to self-help" (Stoll 2006, 267).

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