

Catholicism as Living Memory in a Montreal Spiritualist Congregation¹

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Abstract

Since 2000 I have been observing a Spiritualist congregation in Montreal, the Spiritual Church of Healing (SCH). Members, generally brought up as Catholics, often experience meaningful spiritual transformation through their participation in the SCH. However this does not alter their sense of religious belonging. Moreover, Catholic saints, beliefs and symbolism are omnipresent in the rituals and other religious activities of the SCH, as well as in the discourse of members. The analysis presented here helps further the understanding of contemporary religious hybridity and shows how the Catholic past shapes Quebec's religious landscape in the present.

Keywords: Religious hybridity. Spiritualism. Catholicism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since 2000 I have been observing a Spiritualist congregation in Montreal, the Spiritual Church of Healing (SCH).² The present analysis concerns the enduring presence of Catholic belief and practice in this group, most of whose members are French-speaking native-born Québécois. Most in this congregation (its official membership is 275) were brought up Catholic. However, they do not see themselves as "converts" from Catholicism to Spiritualism. Moreover, most, even those who have been very active in the SCH for decades as healers and mediums, do not see their religious practice in terms of denominational belonging. A Spiritualist baptism for adults exists, in theory, but no one in the group, including Michel, the pastor, has experienced or witnessed the ritual. Though Spiritualism is a denomination in historical, objectivist terms, it does not function as such for those who attend and contribute their services (as healers and mediums) to the SCH.

Elsewhere (MEINTEL, 2007b) I have tried to show that these individuals' aversion to seeing their religious practice in terms of a denominational identity does not exclude the fundamental "change of heart" (HEIRICH, 1977) that lies at the core of conversion. Yet at the same time, the common Catholic frame of reference these Spiritualists share continues to color the ritual activities of this congregation and is, in fact, positively reinforced in the ritual life of the SCH. Catholicism remains present in their lives – and in the SCH – in the form of beliefs, practices and vocabulary. Most retain some kind of identification with the Catholic Church and do

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not see this as in conflict with their participation in Spiritualist ritual events. The fact that there is no “conversion” to Spiritualism allows them to retain a Catholic identity, as most I have met at the SCH do, while finding new ways to experience the sacred in their lives.

Examining the vitality of Catholic beliefs, devotion and practices among these Spiritualists offers an occasion to reflect on the significance of religious identity and as regards belief and practice. Furthermore, when seen in the light of our findings from a wider study on contemporary religious groups in Quebec, our analysis contributes to deepening our understanding of contemporary religious hybridity and of how the Catholic past shapes Quebec’s religious landscape in the present.

2 THE RESEARCH³

The study is based principally on participant observation, with occasional interviews with the pastor, “Michel”, and interviews with 16 key informants (8 women, 8 men). Three initial interviews with Michel focused on his personal and religious trajectory and the history of the “Spiritual Church of Healing”.⁴ Since then, interviews with Michel have been carried out informally and concern questions about spiritualist belief and practice, events and changes in the SCH and more generally, in spiritualist groups throughout the city.

A friend introduced me to Michel, a minister, medium and healer who also performs exorcisms⁵ in late 1999. Michel, fully bilingual, grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Montreal in a French-speaking family, but was sent to an English-language school run by the Jesuits – his father’s only hope of upward mobility for his five sons. He went on to study at a local university and then worked for many years in finance for a large corporation; now he does accounting on a part-time basis. Widowed in his twenties and later divorced from his second wife, he now shares his life with Elisabeth, a Spiritualist medium and healer who is active in the SCH.

When I approached him about the possibility of carrying out research in the SCH, Michel readily accepted and invited me on the same occasion to join a “closed” group. This was the first I had heard of such groups; I would soon discover that they are oriented to helping members develop their “spiritual gifts”, particularly clairvoyance. All this was on the condition of my being discreet – not disturbing the religious atmosphere of the gathering and participating like other members. I agreed, since what interested me most was the Spiritualist experience: what is it like to see clairvoyantly, to give and receive healing, and how does this kind of religion fit into the daily lives of the participants?

Inspired by Favret-Saada’s study (1977) of modern witchcraft in Normandy, the research that evolved was based on participant observation, with notes being taken outside the church context. I went on this way for about two years, except for three interviews with Michel in the months following my entry into the closed group. In order to study Spiritualists’ religious experience, I would have to, para-

phrasing Favret-Saada, accept becoming a participant in situations where this experience is manifested and share in the discourse through which it is expressed (43).

Early on, it became apparent that the research would have to focus on Michel and his network rather than the whole of the congregation. The physical space of the SCH (described further on) is not the site of a clearly bounded group, but rather the spatial focus for several networks, each centered around a minister (MEINTEL, 2003). The core of these networks are made up of individuals who frequent the groups directed by a particular minister, the mediums and healers trained by him/her, and those who tend to go to the services where that minister officiates. (All the ministers are also mediums and healers).

In the SCH these networks overlap to a degree, and more so at present than when I first began the research. At that time, it seemed possible that the congregation might divide and disperse, due to internal tensions. As in Pentecostal churches, decentralized authority in Spiritualist congregations makes fission caused by religious disagreements or interpersonal issues a fairly common occurrence. Ministers sometimes leave one church for another or break away to form a new congregation, in which case, their network tends to follow. Therefore, I decided to focus the research primarily on Michel's network.

After several years of participating in the biweekly meetings of the closed group and attending church services when Michel officiated (several times a month), I began to interview "key informants", the majority of whom are between 30 and 60 years of age and have been going to the Spiritual Church for at least three years. The interviews focus on the individual's religious trajectory as it fits into their overall life course and their personal experience of Spiritualism. The latter includes experiences of spiritual "gifts" (e.g., trance, healing, clairvoyance) and other extraordinary experiences, such as astral projection, attacks by negative spirits (*mauvaises entités*), premonitory dreams and so on. Like Fonseca (1991), who has studied religious hybridity in a Brazilian favela, and more recently McGuire (2008), whose work is based in the United States, I am interested in how religious practice and beliefs of my interlocutors weave into their daily lives. Insofar as possible, I usually meet informants outside the church, in cafés, my home or theirs, and continue participant observation on a part-time basis. At this writing, formal interviews with Michel and other key informants are largely concluded but I continue to attend and observe SCH activities.

Most of the participants in the study work full-time, some in the lower echelons of the health care system (e.g. as home caregivers, massage therapists), some in service jobs (sales clerk, for example), and others in skilled occupations (as mechanics and so on). Some of the older interviewees finished high school as adults or not at all; few have post-secondary education, (though this seems to be changing among younger members of the congregation). Most have been divorced at least once and most presently are in a stable couple relationship. Interviews (except with

Michel) are carried out in homes, cafés – anywhere but the church – so as to get an idea of how religion fits into the wider life context of the participants.

The “observation of participation” (TEDLOCK, 1991) approach adopted for this research is one that, in my view, corresponds to its object, the Spiritualist experience. As explained elsewhere (MEINTEL, 2006, 2007a), I have shared in many of the experiences that are recounted by key informants in their narratives (for example, giving and receiving healing and clairvoyance); but not all. Most have done with lower entities, or felt attacked by them, something that is not part of my experience to date.

The research is based not only on my participation in Spiritualist activities but also on many interviews and systematic observations: e.g., of attendance at services, changes in the church’s decor, turns of phrase used in the ministers’ and mediums’ speech at services, and so forth. The reactions and comments of several assistants and numerous anthropologist friends who have visited the SCH and met Michel⁶ have also been helpful. My assistants and I have also observed services at the seven other Spiritualist congregations in the city that I know of. Finally, I have consulted what academic studies can be found on Spiritualist groups and mediums (NELSON, 1969a, SWATOS; GISSURARSON, 1997), as well as writings by Spiritualists of the past. Few who attend the activities of the SCH read the latter; moreover the authors’ names would mean little to an academic readership. However these works, several of which are cited herein, provide useful points of comparison with contemporary Spiritualist practices and beliefs.

Before looking at the Catholic elements as they enter into Spiritualist beliefs and practices in this congregation, an overview of the SCH and its activities is in order.

3 SPIRITUALISTS IN MONTREAL

The movement that gave rise to modern Spiritualism began in 1847 in a religious climate that was already affected by movements such as transcendentalism and Swedenborgianism.⁷ Two girls, Margaret and Kate Fox, living on a farm in Hydesville, New York, established contact with the spirit of a dead man whose bones were eventually discovered in the basement of their house (AUBRÉE; LAPLANTINE, 1990; NELSON 1969a). Over the latter part of the nineteenth century, the movement that developed around the Fox sisters spread across the United States and across the Atlantic to France, England and points beyond, influencing French Kardecism as well as other religious movements.⁸

In a sense, Spiritualism is an older “new religious movement”, one that settled into a *modus operandi* that corresponds neither to the sect model nor to that of the bureaucratized religious institution, the “church” of Weber’s bipolar model. Michel as well as the members of the SCH, vigorously reject the label of “sect” or “cult”, not surprising given the stigma currently attached to these designations. However, from an objectivist, sociological point of view, Spiritualism functions in accordance with

Stark and Bainbridge's "purely technical" model of the cult as an innovative religious group that creates a new "religious culture" where beliefs and practices, as well as the social structure of the group, differ from those of longer-established Christian religions. The British sociologist Nelson (1987, p. 139) who identifies as a Spiritualist, considers Spiritualism a "spontaneous cult", i.e., an innovative religious movement characterized by diffuse authority (CAMPBELL, 1998). The vague boundaries of cults, their fluctuating belief systems, and rapid turnover of membership (WALLIS, 1977, p. 14), all characterize Spiritualism as I have observed it in Montreal.

Spiritualism arrived in the city from England on the heels of the "Quiet Revolution", a time of dramatic social change in Québec that corresponds roughly to the tenure of Jean Lesage as premier (1960-1966) (LINTEAU et al., 1989). During this period, the Catholic church lost its hegemony over the social welfare, educational and health systems at the same time as it was losing many of the clergy and religious who had provided the labor for those systems. Meanwhile the religious practice of the Catholic faithful began to decline (BIBBY, 1990); at the same time, the new climate of religious freedom made for an ever more diversified religious landscape.

The Spiritualist Church of Healing (SCH) was the second spiritualist congregation established in Montreal. Established in 1967 by a married couple of ministers from England, only a year after another such couple founded the first Spiritualist congregation in Montreal several blocks away, the SCH was originally English-speaking. However, the founding couple left Canada in 1975, leaving a young Francophone minister, Michel, as pastor. The SCH quickly became Francophone in membership as well as in most of its services and other religious activities. Disaffected Catholics came to form the bulk of the SCH's clientele; its ministers and its members today are almost all of Catholic background. Most grew up in working-class Francophone neighborhoods in Montreal and nearby suburbs, and many have resided in the same general area all their lives.

The SCH has legal status as a church, unlike most Spiritualist groups in Montreal. This makes it possible for its ministers to perform marriages and officiate at funerals. Gay marriages are officially permitted, and naming ceremonies are performed for children of gay or lesbian couples. Request for such rituals often come from non-members who seek to mark these rites of passage in religious fashion but without constraints as to their religious belonging or practice.

Several services each month are now bilingual, since the SCH has begun to attract Anglophones coming from other Spiritualist congregations in the city. At present, most who attend services at the church (many more the official membership) are Québécois from Montreal and the surrounding area whose first language is French. The congregation has become noticeably younger over the last few years; most attending services are adults in their thirties to their sixties, with a smattering of older and younger individuals. Usually, women generally well outnumber men

at services, though there are about as many men as women among the ministers, mediums and healers who practice in the SCH.⁹

As other researchers (ZARETSKY, 1974, p. 77) have noted regarding Spiritualist groups in the U.S., the SCH's financial means are limited. The church subsists on donations and the collections that mark every service; these are just enough to cover rent, heating and (an innovation of recent years), air conditioning in the summer. Occasional fundraising activities supplement the church's income, by offering for a moderate price, an opportunity for readings by one of the church's mediums. None of the six ministers, who include three women, are salaried, nor are the mediums and healers who contribute their efforts at church services.

Several Spiritualist congregations, including the SCH, are based in downtown Montreal; the others are situated in working-class areas of the city and are easily accessed by public transport. The SCH occupies a rented space with two floors on a slightly seedy strip of a main thoroughfare and is located near a metro station; some who attend its activities come from far suburbs and many get there by the bus or subway. Marked only by a cardboard sign in its narrow doorway, the church is easy to miss among the many small businesses on the block. These include several used bookstores, a number of small ethnic grocery stores, a strip joint and a sex shop.

Inside, the decor is simple, with symbols from the Catholic and other traditions as well as some new age type paintings. A Bible (King James version) is on prominent display.

In front, one notes small organ (played in the past by Michel's late father, but never in the time I have known this congregation). The pulpit is at one end of a raised dais, and is flanked by a few chairs, where mediums sit during the services. (Usually, several mediums work at any given service, taking turns to give messages to those present). The walls are hung with paintings in a "New Age" style of angels and other spirit entities, including a number that depict Natives, as well as one of Jesus knocking at a door and a Star of David. Upstairs, one finds a meeting room lined with bookshelves (the SCH library), a kitchenette and a small office. On this floor, more traditional Catholic images are on display, including one of the Sacred Heart. Flowers, streamers and other decorations adorn the church for holidays such as Mother's Day and St. Valentine's Day, as well as Christmas and Easter.

Of all the Spiritualist groups in Montreal, the SCH is the most Francophone – which means that its members are more likely to have grown up Catholic than is the case in most of the other groups. One of the other groups, the "Temple spirituel" (pseudonym) is made up mostly of French-speaking Québécois and Italo-québécois and has, if anything, an even more pronounced Catholic flavor than the SCH, a point to which I return later on. All of these congregations share the same basic principles of Spiritualism, though the vocabulary varies. These include the existence of God, sometimes termed "Universal Intelligence", individuals' responsibility for any actions committed on earth, the consequences of these actions in the

afterlife, the continued existence and eternal progress of the human soul, and the possibility of communion with spirits, etc.¹⁰

4 SPIRITUALIST BELIEFS

Apart from the seven basic principles, my informants share a number of other beliefs that are common to Spiritualists (MEINTEL, 2005),¹¹ most importantly regarding spiritual gifts and spirit guides. Spiritualists hold that everyone has spiritual gifts for various sorts of healing (by the laying on of hands, at a distance) and clairvoyance. The latter takes various forms: via objects, in psychometry), through “feeling” (*le sentir*), visions, clairaudience (hearing sounds and words from the spirit world). Other gifts include astral projection (being in several places at once), spirit-inspired speech and art, automatic writing (little practiced in the SCH) and so on. These gifts can be developed and employed to do harm or good.

Spiritualist tradition holds that everyone has a number of spirit guides. The most important of the Spirit guides is the “gatekeeper”, one who allows other spirits to come through or prevents them from doing so in cases where mediums go into “deep trance”, also known as channeling. Typically, in the SCH, the Gatekeeper is the spirit of a Native. It is interesting to note that British Spiritualist authors of earlier generations often make mention of “Red Indian spirit guides” (MARRYAT, 1920), something that (NELSON, 1969a).

On the negative side, the Spiritualists I have interviewed all believe in “evil entities” (“mauvaises entités”). While they may or may not believe in Satan, they hold that there are spirits of deceased individuals who do harm by attacking people or seducing them away from their spiritual development, sometimes in a literal sense.¹² Nearly all those I interviewed had some such experience to recount. For several, their first contact with Michel, and thus with the SCH, was when they sought help for dealing with attacks by harmful spirits caused, they believed, by persons who wished them ill.

All the foregoing beliefs form part of the lived experience of my informants or those close to them. Many have seen angels (who manifest as very large entities, as tall as the room they appear in), guides and other spirit entities, sometimes negative ones. In fact, belief in guides and healing is integral to the ritual activities of the SCH, as well as the belief in mediumship, or communication with spirits. Many exercises that are done in the closed groups (described below) are oriented to developing contact with one’s spirit guides.

Angels are mentioned in the seven principles¹³ and several of my informants report seeing them; angels manifest, they recount, as very large entities, who are as tall as the room they appear in. Animals are believed to have spirits and a life after death and at church services, mediums often give messages to those present concerning their pets, living and deceased.¹⁴

Another category of beliefs includes notions that are widely subscribed to by Spiritualists but are not considered integral to Spiritualism. Many are taken from other traditions; for instance beliefs about reincarnation and chakras. Nonetheless, such beliefs are often mentioned in the clairvoyant messages transmitted by mediums and in the exchanges of the closed group, discussed in the next section. Unlike many who frequent the SCH, Michel is skeptical about reincarnation. (“At least I hope it’s not true.”). On the other hand, he holds, as do many Spiritualists, that a pre-birth phase of life begins about a year and a half before conception; thus he often sees children in clairvoyance long before they are conceived. In the same category of beliefs we also find what I call the “Catholic substratum” of religious belief and devotion that will be described in greater detail shortly. While not essential to spiritualism, Catholic beliefs and practices are often mentioned by ministers and mediums at the SCH. Such references flavor the atmosphere of this group and, I suggest, permit many who still maintain Catholic beliefs and in some cases, Catholic religious practice, to feel at home there.

Finally, there is a kind of Spiritualist “lore”; i.e., notions current among Spiritualists that are not known to all of them, but are believed by some (e.g., the idea that a candle suddenly going out is the act of a lower spirit entity). Most of my informants have occasional recourse to astrology, tarot, crystals and so on, but clearly separate such practices from spirituality.

5 RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

The Spiritual Church of Healing holds four services a week that are open to the public; three are held on Sunday and one on a weekday evening. Services last from about ninety minutes to two hours; all begin with opening prayers that include the Notre Père (Our Father), in the Protestant version.¹⁵ The main service on Sunday includes several hymns of Protestant inspiration (mostly classics, such as “Nearer My God to Thee”, translated into French) and a guided meditation. However, when Michel officiates, the meditation is usually replaced by a “discourse”. Every service includes a collection as well as a period where “messages” (clairvoyance) are given by one or several mediums to those present. The service ends with prayers and a closing hymn.

Messages normally focus on themes such as health, emotional well-being, family and other personal relationships, work, and spiritual development. They are as likely to evoke the past and present as the future. In most cases, mediums know little if anything about the person they “see” for. Often mediums see one or several spirits around the individual; they may identify such entities as being a loved one (e.g. “I get a paternal energy, has your father passed on? If not, perhaps it’s your grandfather.”). Occasionally services feature a medium channeling spirit guides.¹⁶

A “healing service” follows the main Sunday service. Here seven or eight healers work, each with a person seated in a chair in front of them, transmitting healing to by the laying on of hands. Eventually all present are able to receive indivi-

dual healing. Healers do not actually touch the person receiving their ministrations; rather, they work on the energy field around the person sitting in front of them.

There are no regular non-religious activities at the SCH. Though a number of researchers attribute the attractions of contemporary religious movements to the social “community” they offer individuals who might otherwise be isolated or marginal (COHEN 1990; HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2001), this is mostly absent from the SCH.¹⁷ Over time, friendships may develop between those who attend church activities, but any social activities they engage in are based on personal affinities and take place outside the church.

5.1 CLOSED GROUPS

Besides regular services open to all comers, there are a number of closed groups (“circles” in classic spiritualist parlance). Ranging between five and twenty or so members, these meet on a weekly or biweekly basis for nine months of the year (mid-September through mid-June). As I have described elsewhere (MEINTEL, 2007ab), the object of these groups is to develop the members’ spiritual gifts, especially, their clairvoyant capacities, under the supervision of an experienced Spiritualist minister/medium.

At the SCH such groups are often called “courses in spiritual development”. Some of those who are enrolled in the closed groups never attend services; these are often individuals who seek to avoid anything “too religious”. However, even the closed groups begin and end with prayers, including the Our Father. At the same time, some who attend services regularly are not interested in participating in a closed group and find their activities strange, even a bit frightening.

None of the ministers push the members of their groups to follow particular religious practices. At most a medium might give someone a message such as, “Your guides would like you to meditate now and then.” Nevertheless, those who continue to attend a closed group over a period of years usually develop a routine of spiritual practices of their own choosing in their daily lives.

6 CATHOLIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICE IN THE SPIRITUALIST CONTEXT

To invoke a linguistic term, I see the Catholic elements that are easily observable at the SCH as forming a kind of religious “substrate”. Just as the features of an older indigenous tongue may be found in a more recently established Creole language, so the activities of the SCH are sprinkled with references familiar to the members from their Catholic upbringing. Catholic saints and practices frequently mentioned, and always in a positive way.

The official discourse of the SCH is characterized by a vocabulary that avoids certain typically religious terms; for example, Michel’s allocutions on Sundays are termed a “discourse”, rather than a “sermon”, in the SCH calendar. Members

occasionally slip into a familiar Catholic lexicon, referring to “la messe” (Mass), “le sermon” and so on. Also, members of the congregation refer to the prayer as the “Our Father” (le Notre Père), in Catholic fashion, rather than “the Lord’s Prayer”, as per the Protestant usage.

The ministers emphasize the religious nature of Spiritualism as practiced at the SCH by mentioning its legal status as a church and occasionally having those present read the seven basic principles of Spiritualism at the beginning of the service, as is the case in a number of other Spiritualist congregations in Montreal. However, despite the fact that Spiritualism developed out of Protestantism, the SCH does not present itself as Protestant, still less as “Christian” (a designation that has become too associated with the Religious Right, as Michel sees it); rather, ministers emphasize rather Spiritualism’s openness to many sacred traditions. One notes borrowings from Eastern traditions in the frequent mention of “chakras” and reincarnation and the practice of guided meditation at many services. Neoshamanic influences are also present, in the Native-style drumming at some healing services and the many references by mediums to, for example, the “sacred fire”, the elements, Native guides and animal guides). This openness extends as well to Catholicism, the religion of primary socialization for most who frequent the SCH.

6.1 A LIVING MEMORY

For example, mediums often see the devotion of the person they are addressing to one or another Catholic saint. “I see the blue of the Virgin Mary around you, you should continue praying to her.” Often one hears references to St. Joseph, the Oratoire St.-Joseph (Saint Joseph’s Oratory), to Frère André.¹⁸ On occasion, the messages transmitted by the medium encourage the recipient in their frequentation of a Catholic church or shrine. For example, on one occasion where I was present, a man was encouraged to visit the Oratory (where he had gone occasionally in the past), and told that he would have a very meaningful spiritual experience there.

Many of the most active members of the SCH pray to the Virgin, St. Joseph, and other Catholic saints. Roger, now in his sixties, is a medium and is training as a minister:

Sometimes when I’m driving to St. Jérôme, for an hour, I repeat the whole way, “Thank you Jesus, for traveling with me,” like a mantra, or, “Saint Joseph, pray for me”.

Roger’s devotion to St. Joseph, and Frère André as well, dates back to his childhood, when he and his father and other brothers would walk from Lachine to St. Joseph’s oratory.

A number of the services and closed group activities at the SCH feature psychometry, or clairvoyance via material objects. Those present put a personal object of their own or belonging to someone close to them on a tray. Then the mediums, who generally do not know to whom the objects belong, choose an object, hold it in their hands and then transmit a clairvoyant message regarding the owner

of the object. In many cases, the objects left on the tray include small statues, medals, rosaries or other sacred Catholic objects.

Mediums at the SCH make frequent and positive mention of Catholic saints and often see a Catholic nun or priest among the spirit guides of those to whom they address messages. None of the SCH mediums claim to channel a particular Catholic saint, though Michel occasionally channels the spirit of a Catholic nun (as well as that of a rabbi, a Chinese sage, a small Inuit boy and his “gatekeeper”, a Native guide). The leader of another group, the “Temple spirituel”, whose membership includes many baptized in the Catholic faith, believes (as do her followers) that she channels the Virgin Mary. Her church is filled with representations of the Mary and regular services are held in honor of the Virgin. Moreover, mediumnic contact with other Catholic saints is encouraged in this group, and this, some Spiritualist mediums say, to the near-exclusion of guides from other traditions

In the SCH, spirits contacted by mediums are never those who were illustrious in their earthly lives, as in, for example, French Kardecism, or Spiritism (AUBRÉE; LAPLANTINE, 1990),¹⁹ in fact, no effort is made to contact any particular spirit, though at least one of the minister-mediums contacts the spirit of deceased relatives for those who consult with him privately.

6.2 RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION AND BELONGING

Membership in the SCH is by no means an affirmation of religious identity, but merely constitutes a contribution (\$20/year at present) toward the church’s expenses. Members are considered free to participate in other religious groups, as do many. Some practice “Native spirituality” (neoshamanism), praying to the elements, holding sweat lodges and attending the Sun Dance in the U.S. under the supervision of a spiritual teacher there. Some attend meditation groups (of Buddhist or Indian origin, usually). Virtually all keep some form of contact with the Catholic Church, if only via its life crisis rituals (baptisms, weddings, funerals).

Most of those who come to the groups and religious services of the SCH have been dealing with a personal crisis of some sort (illness, divorce, separation, unemployment, ending an addiction) that has obliged them to restructure their lives and has generated a search for meaning. Simply returning to the Catholic Church does not appear as an option. For some, Catholic clerical authority has lost its legitimacy (LEMIEUX, 1992, p. 207); many keep an image of the Church as dogmatic and authoritarian. For the same reasons, Evangelical churches hold little attraction for those who find their way to the SCH. However, several of those I interviewed told me, as one put it, “The SCH reconciled me with the Catholic Church”.

Unease with the institutional aspects of the Catholic Church does not translate into a rejection of Catholic beliefs and practices. For example, Pierrette, in her early 50’s, prays to the Virgin Mary, visits Catholic churches often for a moment of prayer and quiet, and occasionally attends Mass. Another key informant, Nicole, in

her forties, is actively involved in her parish. Like a few others I have met at the SCH, she goes to Mass on a regular basis, as well as often attending services at the SCH and participating in a closed group. Nicole and two women who attend the SCH regularly all sing in the choir at a Sunday Mass in a Catholic parish church.

Some of my key informants have participated in more « exceptional » Catholic religious activities, as is the case for many non-practicing Catholics in Quebec. Several have made pilgrimages – for example, to St. Anne de Beaupré. (BOU-TIN, 2005; CAROUX, 2007; RAJOTTE, 2008). Most have visited St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal (itself a pilgrimage site) on numerous occasions; several have also participated in Catholic monastic retreats. Many at the SCH go to Catholic churches on Easter or at Christmas, and everyone occasionally attends marriages, baptisms or funerals celebrated in Catholic churches. (There is no service on Christmas at the SCH, partly because those who would observe the day in religious fashion are likely to go to a Catholic service with their families.) I know of active members of the SCH whose funerals were held in Catholic churches, whether in accordance with their own wishes or those of surviving relatives.

Given that baptism is not practiced at the SCH²⁰ and that there are no activities oriented to children, it is perhaps not surprising that parents who frequent the SCH often have their children baptized in the Catholic Church and send them to catechism classes. It should be added that some (like many Québécois parents my colleagues and I have encountered in the course of other research) leave choices about First Communion and Confirmation to their children. It often happens that in the same family, some children have experienced the three sacraments of Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation, while others have only been baptized.

Members of the SCH tend to accumulate religious resources rather than reject one set of referents in favor of a new one. In point of fact, the Spiritualists²¹ I have interviewed, including several who are recognized as mediums and healers in the church, tend to resist thinking of Spiritualism in terms of denominational identities. When asked if she would call herself “a Spiritualist”, a medium and healer who has been practicing in the SCH for years replied, “I never thought of it that way.” To the same question, another member of the closed group answered, “I would say I'm spiritual.” Virtually no one considered that they had “renounced” Catholicism; rather, they felt that they had added to the Catholicism of their childhood; indeed most still identify as “Catholic”, however uneasily. And in two cases, key informants used virtually the same words, saying that their experience at the SCH had “reconciled” them with Catholicism, meaning that their experiences in the SCH have allowed them to connect with the Catholic Church in a new way.²²

The resolutely nondoctrinaire character of Spiritualism lends itself, no doubt, to such hybridity. In this regard, one finds British Catholics who were also Spiritualists in the early twentieth century (Marryat 1920). Swatos and Gissurason (1997) write of Unitarian Spiritualists in Iceland. However, it is important to emphasize

that in the Quebec context, such hybridity goes well beyond the SCH, and in fact, seems fairly widespread among native-born Montrealers baptized in the Catholic church. The tendency toward individualized religious hybridities can be observed in a number of other religious groups in the city; for example, in many of the groups studied in a broader project;²³ e.g. neoshamanic groups (Wicca, Druids, Native²⁴ spirituality), Buddhists and others, we are finding similar patterns. Such groups find much of their membership among those of Catholic background who may or may not identify as such, and who have often retained many elements of Catholic belief. As in the SCH, a few in these groups are actually practicing Catholics, while many others attend Catholic churches for major holidays and life-crisis rituals such as baptism, funerals and marriage.

Like the Spiritualists, “born Catholics” who frequent other religious groups do not see their participation in these newer (to Quebec) religions in terms of denominational or religious identity. Indeed, and also like the Spiritualists, they tend to be uncomfortable with the very word “religion”, finding in it connotations of clerical authority, and much prefer the more subjectivist term “spirituality”. It should be noted that, although some religious identities are supposedly exclusive, including that of « Catholic », this does not necessarily constrain individuals’ behavior. In other research, I have come across cases of Catholics who occasionally attend evangelical churches, for example.

7 THE MEANING OF MAGASINAGE

This brings up another question: what is the meaning of what the Québécois call *magasinage*; i.e., “shopping” (from *magasin*, meaning “store”) among various religious groups? First, a caveat: as observed in our research in Quebec, including that among Spiritualists, this « shopping », is not the free-for-all that phrases like « religion à la carte » (BIBBY, 1990) might lead one to imagine. It is rather the recourse to several traditions and several types of spiritual groups, usually two or three at most, with New Age influences often crosscutting all of them. One may ask, why this accumulation of religious resources? What are these “shoppers”, particularly Catholic-born Spiritualists and others of the Franco-Québécois majority, seeking?

Our research suggests that for the most part, they are searching for a way to find meaning in life, ways of making deeper sense of experience than might be found by other means, meanings that give hope and orientation for living (not necessarily prescriptions and proscriptions), much as proposed by Lemieux (2002). Just as Lemieux and his colleagues (1992) found in their study based in the region of the city of Quebec, those I have met at the SCH retain a deep belief in a transcendent reality.

Based on a first reading of the data from the wider study, they seem to be seeking called « tools for transcendence ». Experiences available on a regular basis at the SCH, such as those of transmitting or receiving clairvoyant messages, giving or receiving healing, and in the closed groups, often witnessing or living “extraordina-

ry" experiences (for example, clairvoyant perceptions, sometimes shared between several participants, or feeling the presence of spiritual guides) all provide occasions of *communitas* (TURNER, 1975). Like Catholic pilgrimages, Buddhist meditation and shamanic voyages, religious practices at the SCH generate experiences of unspoken yet intense communion with the transcendent world of Spirit that are shared with others participants. For those present, who usually only know each other's first names, such moments provide inspiration and new meaning for their daily lives.

Experiences of this sort are unlikely to be discussed with non-participants. My Spiritualist interviewees are extremely discreet as to their religious practice and experience. Very few speak with family members, work colleagues or friends about religion, unless they express interest in the subject. In the wider project now underway, we have found this to be the general case for Catholic-born, French-speaking Québécois who frequent religious groups other than Catholic parish churches.²⁵

How "born Catholics" interpret their experience in other groups is, of course, variable. It sometimes happens that Catholic elements color spiritual experiences in other of religious contexts. We have seen this as regards what Spiritualist mediums "see" for members of the SCH; similarly, several informants who participate in neo-shamanic groups observed in the wider study (NORMANDIN, 2010; CORNEILLER, forthcoming) report having shamanic visions involving figures from their Catholic heritage; e.g., the Virgin Mary.

My work among Spiritualists and that of our team in the wider study of religions in Quebec indicate that what "shoppers" (or, seekers) find outside the Catholic Church, be it at the SCH or in other groups, are the means for experiencing a connection with transcendence, both in the ritual context and in their daily lives. "Shopping" is, I would argue, a form of religious agency. Individuals create personalized, meaningful hybrid spiritual practices, often supported by frequenting several types of religious groups.²⁶

It is perhaps the experience of transcendence that allows some at the SCH to feel "reconciled" with Catholicism via their experience of Spiritualism. Similarly, some of the Québécois who have frequented a Buddhist centre observed in the broader study (SÉDILLOT, 2009) eventually return to Catholicism as a result of their experience with Buddhism.

8 CONCLUSION

I have argued elsewhere (MEINTEL, 2007b) that the prevalence of exclusive identities (ethnic, religious and national) is perhaps an artifact of the era of the pre-eminence of the nation-state. In the ethnic domain, for example, mixedness has been the "marked" case, to borrow another linguistic term. The religious dynamic of our era is obliging researchers to come to terms with the fact that exclusive religious identities and affiliations are far from being a generalized norm, that syncretism, bricolage and religious mobility (i.e., circulating among religious

groups or accumulating religious resources of varied provenance) are widely the case. Moreover, as I have argued in the case of the SCH (2005), religion can be a vibrant, intense affair for individuals who form a personal spiritual synthesis from elements of diverse provenance. To paraphrase McGuire (2008, p. 185), rather than conceptualizing 'individuals' religions as little versions of some institutional model" researchers would do well to take into account "human creativity [...] and construction from diverse elements."

Quebec offers a particularly interesting context for the study of present-day religious mobility and hybridity. The long period where the Church was experienced as a kind of "total social fact" in the lives of the faithful, ended relatively recently. Moreover, rapid secularization on the institutional level, and generalized anticlericalism on the ideological level, marked a historical moment where the influences of globalization were just beginning to be felt. Increased travel and international contact and greater mass media influences, along with diversified migration patterns have all led to the "challenge" of religious pluralism (LEMIEUX, 2007, 2008). At the same time, just as a religious void was created in the lives of the Catholic-born majority, the religious resources available in Quebec have multiplied.

The members of the SCH exemplify a tendency that seems to be widespread among Quebec-born Catholics; i.e., they continue to participate in Catholic religious culture (LEMIEUX, 1990) and to a lesser extent, in Catholic ritual life. The fact that there is no "conversion" to religions such as Spiritualism, Neoshamanism or Wicca allows them to retain a Catholic identity, as most I have met do, while finding new ways to experience the sacred in their lives. They are not "unchurched" in any simple way (see Fuller 2001 for a discussion of the different meanings of the term as it applies to Americans); rather, they identify with the denomination of their birth, Catholicism, while their participation in other types of spiritual/religious groups and adoption of practices found therein is not seen in terms of denominational belonging, conversion or as adopting a new religious identity. Though these Québécois follow behavior patterns that are widespread in the U.S. (PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2008) in that their religious practices and frequentations are different from those of their youth, they are not detached from organized religion.²⁷

While their Catholic-born Spiritualists at SCH, like those who are attracted to Buddhist and Neoshamanic spiritualities, find second religious homes, where their existing beliefs are accommodated and even encouraged. The relative secrecy that surrounds the hybrid religious beliefs and practices of members of the SCH, as well as those of many other Catholic-born, French-speaking Québécois, is an issue that warrants further analysis. For the moment let us simply note that the popular perception of religious diversity in Quebec society tends to focus on issues such as the veil and the kirpan that evoke ethnic as well as religious difference, leaving invisible the religious plurality to be found in the «lived religion» (MCGUIRE, 2008) of

the Catholic-born majority as exemplified by the members of the Spiritual Church of Healing as well as other religious groups in Quebec.

A Memória Viva do Catolicismo numa Congregação de Espiritualista de Montreal

Resumo

Desde 2000 tenho observado uma congregação de Espiritualista em Montreal, a Igreja Espiritual da Cura. Os membros, geralmente criados como Católicos, muitas vezes experimentam a transformação espiritual significativa pela sua participação na Igreja Espiritual da Cura. Contudo, isso não afeta o seu sentido da pertinência religiosa. Além disso, os santos, as crenças e o simbolismo católicos são onipresentes nos rituais e nas outras atividades religiosas da Igreja Espiritual da Cura, bem como no discurso de membros. A análise apresentada aqui ajuda a compreender a hibridiz religiosa contemporânea e mostra como as formas Católicas passadas na paisagem religiosa de Quebec são no presente.

Palavras-chaves: Hibridismo religioso. Espiritismo. Catolicismo.

Notas explicativas:

¹ This article was first published in Quebec Studies, v. 52, p. 69-86, 2012. It is reprinted here with permission.

² Pseudonym. However, the shortened form "Spiritual Church", or "Eglise spirituelle", is often used by members of the congregation. Pseudonyms are also used for the individuals mentioned. Interview quotes are based on verbatim transcriptions, with minor changes to assure clarity.

³ The research was facilitated by Social Science and Humanities Research Council funds, administered by the Université de Montréal.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used for individuals contacted in the course of the research and for names of Spiritualist groups.

⁵ Exorcisms are performed in private and usually concern individuals who do not frequent the SCH. At present, Michel is the only minister at the SCH who does them.

⁶ My thanks to Géraldine Mossière, Judith Asher, Claudia Fonseca, Sylvie Fortin, Louis-Robert Frigault, Isabel Heck, Karine Géoffrion and Ilda Januario for their insightful observations at different points of the research. Géraldine Mossière also provided helpful comments on this article.

⁷ Named for its main figure, the Swedish philosopher and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), Swedenborgianism still exists as a religion. Like spiritualism it emphasizes the eternal life of the human spirit and the validity of all religious faiths. For its tenets see the site of the Swedenborgian Church of North America: <<http://www.swedenborg.org/tenets.cfm>>. New England transcendentalism was a philosophical and literary group active in the decades before the American Civil War that included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (MCCLLENON, 1998).

⁸ Swatos and Gissurason (1997, p. 63-65) suggest that Swedenborgianism, rather than the movement around the Fox sisters, was the major influence in the development of Icelandic Spiritualism.

⁹ Braude (1989) has noted the association between Spiritualism and feminism in the latter half of the nineteenth century; Haywood (1983) speaks of the "empowerment" of women in Spiritualist groups.

¹⁰ These principles are articulated somewhat differently from one Spiritualist group to another; see for example the following Web pages: <<http://www.pathwaytospirit.co.uk/7-principles-of-spiritualism.htm>>. (consulted 14 aug. 2008); see also: <<http://www.communityspiritualist.org/cscprinciples.html>>. (consulted 22 sep. 2010).

¹¹ I refer to my informants at the SCH as "Spiritualists". However, as I explain in a later section, few of them think of Spiritualism in terms of denominational affiliation.

¹² Several informants report sexual encounters with spirits (male or female); it is thought that the entity seeks to create a sexual dependency that will put the person in his or her power.

¹³ One of the principles, as it appears in the hymnal of the SCH, reads, "The communion of Spirits and the ministry of angels."

¹⁴ This belief seems to have long been widespread in Spiritualism (BARBANELL, 1940).

¹⁵ Spiritualists use the Protestant version of this prayer, which concludes with a sentence that is not usually included in the Catholic version: "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever."

¹⁶ In recent years, Michel has channeled a number of his guides at a January event where the latter give their prognostications for the year to come.

¹⁷ Two non-religious events (communal suppers) were held in the summer of 2006, the first in decades, in order to raise money.

¹⁸ Frère André, canonized in 2010, lived much of his life in Montreal (1845-1937). He is widely venerated in Quebec and is credited with many miracles. St. Joseph's Oratory, a Montreal landmark, was erected at his initiative.

¹⁹ Spiritists often seek contact with the spirits of great intellectuals of the past, such as Victor Hugo; however, one medium I met in Lyon, who considers himself both "spiritist and spiritualist" is inspired by St. Theresa of Avila and believes that he is in direct mediumnic communication with her.

²⁰ Michel informs me that such a ritual exists in Spiritualist tradition, but that there is no need for it at the SCH: "They are all baptized already", as he puts it.

²¹ I call them "Spiritualists" as a form of shorthand, meaning those who frequent the SCH regularly; however they themselves do not do so.

²² For example, the Quebec-born Buddhists studied by Laurent Sédillot (2009).

²³ This project is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (Canada) and by a team grant from the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture (Québec). Researchers include Deirdre Meintel (director), Marie-Nathalie Le Blanc, Claude Gélinas, Khadiyatoulah Fall, Josiane Le Gall and François Gauthier.

²⁴ This designation is used by participants in neochamanic groups influenced by Native spirituality and where often, one or another spiritual teacher is Native.

²⁵ I have heard that such discretion is also the case for certain Catholic (non-parish-based) groups, but have not yet been able to verify this.

²⁶ Besides the Spiritualists (MEINTEL, 2003, 2007), similar tendencies are found among Québécois Buddhists (SÉDILLOT, 2009) and practitioners of neo-shamanism (NORMANDIN, 2010). See also McGuire (2008) regarding religious hybridity in the U.S.

²⁷ It is worth noting in this context that Bibby (2002) finds a modest comeback in recent years for traditional religious organizations in Canada as a whole.

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