

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God as a Transnational Cultural Project¹

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Abstract

As the pioneer of neo-Pentecostalism, the Brazil-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG)/Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD), founded by Edir Macedo, has intensified the main features of Pentecostalism: fear of the forces of evil and the practice of healing and exorcism have been placed front of stage; tithing has become central to membership on pain of being accused of “stealing from God,” and additional donations are noisily demanded. The IURD has brought about a revolution within Pentecostalism because of its transnational centralization, its involvement in Brazilian politics, and the scale of its investment in the media in Brazil and beyond. Uniformity is ensured in ritual and church design. Pastors must be married but, following the church’s guidance, very few have children. In Brazil the church’s leader is straining the guardrails of *laïcité*, blurring the lines between his church, his media empire, and his political involvements.

Keywords: Neo-Pentecostalism; Brazilian politics; exorcism; secularism; neo-Pentecostal ritual; religion and politics in Brazil; neo-Pentecostal media; transnational religion; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God

Resumo

Como pioneira do neopentecostalismo, a Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD)/Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), fundada por Edir Macedo e com sede no Brasil, intensificou as principais características do pentecostalismo: o medo das forças do mal e a prática da cura e do exorcismo foram colocados à frente do palco; o dízimo tornou-se central para a membresia sob pena de ser acusado de “roubar de Deus”, e doações

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adicionais são ruidosamente exigidas. A IURD provocou uma revolução dentro do pentecostalismo por causa de sua centralização transnacional, seu envolvimento na política brasileira e a escala de seu investimento na mídia no Brasil e no exterior. A uniformidade é garantida globalmente nos rituais e no design dos templos. Os pastores devem ser casados, mas, seguindo a orientação da igreja, muito poucos têm filhos. No Brasil, o líder da igreja está forçando as grades de proteção da laicidade, borrando as linhas entre sua igreja, seu império mediático e seus envolvimento políticos.

Palavras chave: neopentecostalismo; política brasileira; exorcismo; secularismo; laicidade; transnacionalismo religioso; rito Pentecostal; mídia Pentecostal; Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus

Quite early on in its short history, the founder and still today leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG—or IURD for Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus), Edir Macedo, showed that he envisaged his church as an international institution. Having started preaching as a teenager and set up a place of worship with others in Rio de Janeiro in 1977, Macedo gained exclusive leadership after a split in 1980. He then lived for a time in the United States, setting up the church’s first establishment there in 1986. Meanwhile, the church was expanding rapidly in Brazil and beyond. Nowadays, when I visit UCKG temples I still notice an atmosphere of energy and restlessness as it pursues ever more followers and seeks to persuade those followers to commit time and resources to the church. Its thousands of pastors and tens of thousands of volunteer assistants are tasked with many duties such as keeping the premises safe and clean, attending to followers and listening to their troubles, managing finances and IT support, organizing followers into groups ranging from Youth (“Victory Youth Groups”) to Seniors (known as “Caleb”),² from hospital visits to fund-raising, from house-to-house visits to staffing local radio stations and manning phone and email-based helplines. In addition to these local commitments, the church’s international mission is a source of pride and motivation, and I know pastors and even assistants who have been dispatched from London to missions in far-off places like Tel Aviv or Sri Lanka.

Pentecostalism was born in California among a diverse population of US Blacks and migrants from the world over, and it was not long before missionaries set out across the world, overcoming national, cultural, and ethnic frontiers, charged with cultivating local leadership and institutions. The result today is that Pentecostalism is a truly global phenomenon, whose followers are said to number hundreds of millions, without centralized apparatuses either nationally or internationally, yet exhibiting recognizable similarities in style of worship and preaching, in ritual and in doctrine. This is what we call “classic” Pentecostalism.³

Pentecostalism differs from the evangelical Christianity which by now dominates Protestantism in the US, because its international projection is not associated with an aspiration to hegemony, or to power, in contrast with contemporary trends such as Dominion Theology, whose very name carries connotations of power.⁴

Enter neo-Pentecostalism, introducing significant changes to this typification, pioneered by the Universal Church and now adopted by many others worldwide. One of those changes is the high degree of centralization whereby the top leadership controls bishops and pastors and financial resources worldwide. Furthermore, ritual practices prescribed at headquarters in São Paulo are enacted everywhere as are guidelines about pastors' married life and training, celebration of annual events like fasts, and special fund-raising exercises. Even church furniture is standard, as is the (quite austere) decoration. To ensure the uniformity of the online message, the church's digital offering is provided in Spanish and English as well as Portuguese.

Neo-Pentecostalism takes the traditional themes from Pentecostal preaching to extremes: Pentecostal preachers in Brazil speak of the devil, but discreetly, as a source of temptation in daily life, as a person's darker side, but in the hands of the UCKG preacher diabolic forces—the “enemy”—become a pervasive and intrusive force of darkness that undermines our confidence in ourselves and leads us into perdition by taking control of those who would destroy us. Pastors proclaim these dangers in a shrill voice and at a high pitch. They take the theme of healing, which Pentecostal preachers also handle with discretion to avoid being taken too literally, and claim noisily that the church has cured people of depression, of anxiety, and occasionally even of serious illnesses. Donations, which Pentecostals conventionally treat as a necessary way of maintaining their churches and their pastors, have from the early days of the Universal Church, been a prominent part of every act of worship: beyond ensuring every maintenance of the church and its pastors, they do the work of the church by funding its expansion across the world, as well as the work of faith, illustrated in real life. By real life, I mean testimony from people who achieve a moral, spiritual, and material renewal, after *sacrificing* their possessions to the church—the word “sacrifice” having replaced “donation” in UCKG jargon. In this church the standard Pentecostal tithing of 10 per cent, derived from biblical quotations such as Leviticus 27:30-32,⁵ is treated as a starting point, as the minimum.

Neo-Pentecostalism is often treated as an example of Prosperity Theology, also known as the Gospel of Health and Wealth, a bundle of ideas or slogans constituting a current within North American and African evangelicalism that treats wealth as evidence of the virtues of the wealthy and the pursuit of riches as a worthy feature of Christian faith. The word “theology” is misplaced in

this context, for it is hard to find a sympathetic, let alone systematic, published account such as one expects of a theology. It is best described as a current, promoted by a number of itinerant celebrity preachers rather than a doctrine followed by an institutionalized church.

The UCKG certainly does not shy away from displays of its own prosperity, as can be seen in its portentous Templo de Salomão in São Paulo, a reference point for followers throughout the world and the church's operational headquarters. Built with the help of donations from congregations worldwide, the Templo's design is inspired by the detailed divine instructions to King David and transmitted to his son Solomon in 1 Chronicles 28:11-21, but is of course many times larger, able to accommodate 10,000 worshippers.⁶ As both tourist attraction and place of worship, it has transformed a declining industrial neighbourhood. Visitors and the faithful can attend services no different from those they might find in any other UCKG church, except that Macedo, his daughter and his son-in-law are more likely to be officiating and the services are streamed on the dedicated TV Templo channel.

There is no doubt that some of the features described here show that the UCKG does promote something like the Prosperity Gospel, but those who define it solely, and thus dismissively, as a vehicle for a Theology of Health and Wealth avoid going up close and studying an undertaking that does not fail to surprise by the scale of its ambition, by the purposiveness of its strategies, and by the influence it wields within Brazil and beyond in many spheres of life.

Despite its stridency and its vociferousness, UCKG preaching is cautious in its support for followers' pursuit of financial success and although they do advertise quasi-magical devices as cures to everyday ills, pastors take care to balance this with exhortations to use one's rationality, or "intelligent faith," and to follow the example of biblical figures who resist temptation. They propagate quasi-magical procedures to prevent marital infidelity, or to help achieve success in business. The faithful pray fervently for divine intervention in their lives, but they are constantly reminded that they must "do their bit" (*you deve fazer sua parte*). Healing, spiritual transformation, peace in the family, and financial security are produced by "intelligent faith." Go to the doctor, listen to the practical advice offered in weekly services entitled "Congress for Success" (*Congresso para o Sucesso*). The following is a summary of words spoken by pastors in a church in Brooklyn:

Take a rose home and put it under your bed, then bring it back next week and it will be burnt. This will help prevent your husband from falling into the hands of a temptress who is performing black

magic rituals to ruin your marriage—but also make sure your husband is looked after, do not provoke him, do not belittle him.⁷

The forces of evil play a more prominent and tangible role in the Universal Church than in other Brazilian Pentecostal Churches, demands for donations are more brazen, and in Brazil, as in South Africa and Mozambique, local possession cults are depicted as fearful, yet real, sources of harm under Satan's control. People must nevertheless respond strategically, applying their intelligence and their common sense, even while calling on God to support them.

1. The church is one part of a three-dimensional project.

The church is one element in an ambitious and wide-ranging set of institutions, organizations, campaigns, and businesses operating under the leadership of Edir Macedo and what must be a very large team, for no individual could manage them all without risking problems such as scandals and financial difficulties. Although we know the names of the most prominent bishops of the church, of the most prominent politicians associated with Macedo, and of key members of his family who are in the public eye and appear frequently on the church's social media outlets and streaming platforms, we have no idea of the structure of decision-making or of the allocation of human and financial resources.

In addition to leading the church, Macedo owns a media empire and some substantial businesses, including the Banco Digi+, and also wields significant political influence in Brazil. From the outset he established radio stations, and within 12 years of founding the church he had bought a functioning, but deeply indebted, television network, TV Record, for US\$49 million. That was in 1989. In 2007 it was said to be worth US\$1.9 billion, but, so long as it is privately held and benefits from its relationship with the church, such numbers are just estimates.⁸ The story of the labyrinthine negotiations leading to its purchase reveals Macedo's political and negotiating skills, as the President-elect at the time, Fernando Collor de Melo, played a role at a pivotal moment, and it also reveals the ability of Macedo and his associates to motivate their followers, for some of the money was raised from members of the church especially in the tense later stages when negotiations were on a knife edge.⁹ Known now as Rede Record, the channel has the second largest audience share, at around 35-40%, on free-to-air television in Brazil, after the forever dominant Globo network, and also broadcasts in other Latin American countries and the USA, where it has a partnership with the free-to-air Spanish-language Univisión network, while

it has a strong presence in Mozambique and is the only Brazilian television channel available in Europe without any subscription fees.

From the start Macedo envisaged a mainstream rather than a religious channel, but the church purchases air time from this as well as other channels for its own broadcasting, principally at night and at rates which may or may not be strictly commercial. Whatever the technical details of the relationship, the church and Record are closely related operations, observable in exchanges of senior personnel and in conversations with pastors and followers who are not embarrassed to speak of the church and Record as partners in the same cause.

Building a network of radio stations is also very important to the church, and during the 1980s and 1990s Macedo bought 78 stations across 15 states, gathered into the Rede Alleluia network.¹⁰

In the 1990s Record started making biblical telenovelas such as *Genesis*, *The Ten Commandments*, and more recently *Queen of Persia* (based on the Book of Esther), *The Book of Kings*, and *Jesus*. These have been quite successful in Brazil, initially at least among audiences seeking less provocative themes—less sex and violence and less challenging treatments of gender and race—than those offered by Globo's novelas. By now they are an established feature of Brazil's telenovela landscape. The more doctrinal, and as its title suggests, apocalyptic, *Apocalypse*, has been less successful.

In 2016 the church also set up a worldwide streaming platform, Univervideo, on which, for a monthly fee of about US\$4, subscribers can watch addresses (*Palavra Amiga*) by Edir Macedo, his daughter and his son-in-law, and other bishops of the church, as well as the biblical novelas, in Portuguese, Spanish, and English. Novelas are also transmitted to subscribers in parallel with the free-to-air broadcast in Brazil without commercial breaks.

The third element of this construction, and the only element confined to Brazil, is politics. In parallel with his pursuit of radio stations and then a TV franchise, Macedo also involved the church in politics at an early stage of its development, putting pastors and church members up for election, starting at the municipal level and then moving on to the state and federal legislatures.¹¹ His brother Eraldo was elected to the Rio de Janeiro state legislative assembly in the first of four successful bids in 1987 and, in the same election, the church's first successful candidate for federal office, Roberto Lopes, was elected Deputy. Lopes was the last remaining of the founders and parted company with Macedo during his mandate, leaving the latter in sole command.

Like other evangelical leaders, the church at first reached local agreements with a range of parties interested in pastors' solid followings, which can serve as a springboard for other candidates on a party's list.¹² But, as ever, Macedo preferred to plough his own furrow and eventually took control of the registra-

tion of a weak party and then changed that too until he settled on the snappy one-word moniker “Republicanos,” which was registered independently with the help of signatures from church followers.¹³ (Such shifts are not unusual in Brazil, where parties are known exclusively by their acronyms and, despite being elected on party lists, politicians can change parties while in office.) By 2024 it was the sixth largest party in the Congress with 41 deputies out of 513.

While Brazil’s pastor-politicians tend to build their reputations and electoral base around issues of personal morality and campaigning against gay marriage and “gender ideology” and against a strict interpretation of the *laïcité* of the country’s constitution, Macedo has been less dogmatic, less ideological, and more focused on building his political influence in the legislature and executive and to a lesser extent (so far) in the judiciary. The Republicanos party’s deputies and senators are not all members of the Universal Church. Some are notoriously ideological like Senator Damaris Alves who was Minister for Women in the recent right-wing government, others are more technocratic like the current governor of São Paulo, Tarcisio de Freitas, a leading contender to be the right-wing candidate in the 2026 presidential election. They also include Senator Hamilton Mourão who was vice-president in 2018-2022 and has defended the attempted disruption of Lula’s assumption of power (alias the *golpe*) in January 2023, but is not known for his religious preferences.¹⁴

Macedo is assumed to be the party leader but his name appears nowhere in an official role. He arranged for an evangelical businessman to be Lula’s vice-presidential candidate in 2002; he nominated a minister in all governments from Lula to Dilma to Temer and the recent four-year illiberal interlude. Bolsonaro had promised to appoint evangelical judges and Macedo is reputed to have sponsored one of his Supreme Court nominees.

Although an injudiciously titled book, *Plano de poder* (2008), authored by Macedo, is sometimes seized upon, perhaps because of its injudicious title (“Plan for Power”), as evidence of his political ambition, yet the content is bland, liberal, and largely secular, speaking of the contribution Christians can make to the quality of politics and making no mention of a religiously inspired political order.¹⁵ There are no policy proposals or any mention of matters relating to personal morality (like gender and abortion), and it has not been available for a long time, which leads me to ask whether the adverse reactions provoked by its title led to its withdrawal. (I found a complete scanned copy on the internet.) Not only has Macedo kept out of public controversies surrounding personal morality—he has in the past expressed support for a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy and both he and his pastors mention avoidance of large families when they speak of “intelligent faith” and the application of rational thought to couples’ decision-making. In recent years there has been

little talk of abortion probably because the subject is just too risky.

Macedo's political operators have not been immune to the temptations that come with political involvement: after Bishop Carlos Rodriguez was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1999, he took command of the church's 22 other deputies, but then got involved in two major corruption scandals and eventually resigned in 2005. He spent time in jail and later at a radio station linked to the Universal Church, but resurfaced in June 2023 as an operative (*articulador*) for the Republicanos in Rio.¹⁶

In the only known survey of its kind, research in Rio de Janeiro in 1994 found that no less than 95% of UCKG members voted for candidates recommended by the church in that year's elections.¹⁷ Republicanos deputies act less in conformity with the strident views (on gender, violence, and race) of the most prominent evangelical politicians and more in accordance with the priorities of the average Brazilian politician: that is, apart from furthering their own political careers and economic interests, they respond to issues raised by their electors.¹⁸

Political involvement probably costs the church little because the campaigning is added on to pastors' everyday activity, and the party, like other parties, receives subsidies from the state. It would appear that the purpose is less to propagate an ideology or a creed than to gain influence in the state apparatus, to consolidate tax exemptions for religious institutions and to gain access to, or insight into, the media regulation. The party's election manifesto in 2022 simply declared adherence to Christian values and the family; it contained no statements on the balance between market and the state in economic policy for example, nor on crime or geopolitics.

2. A neo-Pentecostal message *urbi et orbi*

Global standardization

According to the website of R7, a radio station owned by Edir Macedo or one of his associates, the UCKG has 17,000 bishops and pastors and 12,300 places of worship in 135 countries, and counts "10 million followers."¹⁹ In Colombia, for example, where it has been present since the 1990s, its publication *Noticias Universal* lists 150 establishments on its back page. The UCKG Brazil website names more than 200 in South Africa, each accompanied by a photograph, as is the custom for its churches in all countries.²⁰ Places of worship are managed by a pastoral couple and volunteers (assistants or *obreiros*) numbering a handful or several dozen depending on the size of the church and its congregation. Size and external appearance range from pastiche neoclassical

to the extremely humble—in South Africa some seem to be little more than a shack—distinguished by nothing but the standard signage and worldwide logo.

The management of this organization is a mystery. There is no visible structure of national committees for example, though there are national leaders in each country. These are very often Brazilian as are many of the pastors I have encountered in the 13 countries where I have visited the UCKG. Brazil is certainly the most highly represented country among the pastors, but I cannot say whether it contributes a majority. Argentina is also very well represented. In the UK and the USA, their command of English is impressive and, in Israel, the lead Bishop also speaks Hebrew. The head of the church in the UK, who is Portuguese and speaks near-perfect English, has previously served in Taiwan where he attended university to learn Mandarin for two years. He told me of a colleague from the Brazilian northeastern state of Piauí who had served in China, continued to study in Taiwan, and had become fluent in English and Mandarin.²¹

The backbone of the church is the pastoral couple. Pastors are all men: they have to be married and their wives are expected to give up their professional aspirations or other outside employment to devote themselves to their husbands and the church. Interestingly and puzzlingly, they very rarely have children, another feature which sets this church apart from most strands of Pentecostalism. The reason given is that they have to be ready to move at a moment's notice from one place to another, even one country to another, which is complicated for people with children in school, for example. They also say that simply looking after their flock does not leave time to care for children. That this is church policy was confirmed by a leading Bishop who spoke of it as “guidance” (*orientação*).²² A pastor in Cali, Colombia, who had been with the church for 32 years and was older than most of the pastors I have met, told me in May 2024 that his wife had given up her job as a bacteriologist when they got married and, when I asked if they had children, he made a scissors-like gesture signifying a vasectomy.²³ The Bishop, whom I interviewed in São Paulo, also said that financial oversight figures among wives' many important functions in support of their pastor husbands, which is sensitive because, despite widespread use of card-readers, many donations and tithes are still received in cash.

The worldwide standardization observed in the family life of pastors is replicated in other spheres. Pastors and *obreiros* always wear suits and black leather shoes—never trainers; unless they shave their heads, they part their hair to the side. Although I have not been told they are trained in a certain style of oratory, there is a recognizable UCKG style adopted by pastors everywhere: they raise and lower both volume and pitch with a hammering emphasis, catching the audience by surprise.

Temples of the Universal Church usually put on four services a day; duration

varies but on Sundays they can last two hours or even more. Pastors lead the proceedings from start to finish, their oratory in full flood with barely a hint of hesitation. Even if only a handful of people are present, the pastor will conduct the service as usual, if perhaps somewhat abbreviated.

Every service includes a call for donations. Where other churches would discretely pass a collection box or bag from person to person, in the Universal Church the call for donations is a centrepiece of proceedings, set apart from the tithe—the 10% of pre-tax income contributed by those known in Portuguese as *firmes*, meaning “reliable” or “faithful” followers. To prioritize anything else—even hospital bills or school fees—over the tithe is to “steal from God.”

Ritual is also standardized. Pentecostal churches tend to be wary of ritual in the sense of procedures conducted regularly and connecting the individual with a supernatural force at certain times or certain points of a service: perhaps the simplest example, applicable to all faith traditions, is spontaneous prayer, addressed to a deity, but is not a response to the priest’s instruction “Let us pray” (*Oremus*) which punctuates Catholic or Anglican services. In the Universal Church, followers are asked to bring a rose on certain days: they then take it home and the following week bring it back for burning. It is a gesture signifying and expecting reciprocity and expressing the hope that the rose will have been a force for good for them, as we saw in the example of the rose quoted earlier in this paper.

However much one asks officiants to explain them, rituals remain a mystery: too many loose ends and unexplained terms. Indeed, mystery lies at the heart of our understanding of ritual in general. Those who perform rituals tend to avoid explanations or, when pressed, offer superficial or patently simplistic answers just to stop the interlocutor from persisting. Among Jews for example, this can involve a vague allusion to a long-forgotten rabbi. UCKG pastors link a gesture physically to an object, a blessing or incantation. Thus on a Sunday morning in Pasto, Colombia, in May 2024, where the church had rented a former cinema, every person stopped at a dispenser by the entrance to add a drop of water to their already overflowing plastic bottles. The dispenser was a mundane device with no distinctive decoration or insignia, and the drop of water was dispensed by a pastor or *obrero* through a tap. Naively, as so often, I asked the pastor what this “meant” and he said prayers had been offered over the water for many days and the water would strengthen people’s faith.

But why were the bottles already nearly full? Why only a drop? The answer is that “the pointlessness is the point,” the gesture was performed for its own sake. If they had been performing this gesture to satisfy their thirst they would have brought empty bottles.

The pastors of the Universal Church call their own bluff on the question of ritual and symbolism. Like the pastor just mentioned who spoke of strengthening people's faith, they repeatedly remind listeners that gestures and incantations are affirmations of faith, or *pontos de contacto*, to use a stock phrase.²⁴ To achieve one's desired outcome one must also use one's intelligence—go to a doctor, make a big effort, think carefully about your investment plans. Rituals appeal to the emotions, and that advice, to use one's intelligence, transfers to all sorts of important decisions, notably choosing a life partner. Remember that passion lasts only so long, so ask yourself if your prospective spouse is also suitable in other ways.

I have not seen the water tap procedure elsewhere, but other equally recondite devices are iterated from country to country: one is the use of a piece of sackcloth (*silicio*) variously placed on the shoulders and wrapped around the fist. In Bogotá I was told it signifies *humillación* or subservience to God, but a year before in Lanús, a suburb of Buenos Aires, it was called a *lienzo*—a piece of cloth—and those present were invited to apply it to sore points on their bodies. Like in many religious traditions, objects repeatedly used in ritual acquire a life of their own and can be used metonymically in varied procedures to invoke a supernatural force or agency.

The Universal Church hovers between what might be called the banalization of ritual—that is, the deployment of ritual paraphernalia (like the sackcloth, or “oil from the Holy Land,” or “water from Jacob's Well”²⁵) with little ceremony or deliberation, reminiscent of a “quick fix”—and elaborate execution of prescribed gestures which speak of an ancient heritage while shrouding their “meaning” in a haze of blessings and extravagant hope. In the former case the gesture is vulgarized, loses its aura, and resembles a magician's trick. In the latter case, enacted in the precincts of the Templo, the gesture dissolves into incantations that awaken faith in God. In a performance on YouTube a group of pastors bless and consecrate the flowing water from Jacob's Well, announcing the wonderful things that it has brought and will bring to people suffering in hospital, in police stations, in prisons... and pray that it will be used for healing and the expulsion of evil spirits.²⁶

In another example, at Easter 2023, in the Finsbury Park flagship church in London, assistants distributed hundreds of miniature flasks of “Blessed Oil,” each marked FREE, which they themselves had prepared and labelled. It was explained to me that the oil itself does not produce an effect but acts as a “bridge” between its symbolic significance and a person's faith. The same formula appeared on the IURD Brazilian site in January 2023 in which the water from “Jacob's Well” was described as a “bridge between faith and a miracle.”²⁷

I had an ephemeral insight into this ambiguity in Recife in the Northeast of Brazil and again in Cancún, Mexico, in 2023. In Recife when I asked an *obreiro* whether they still distributed oil from the Holy Land for people to take home, he said they had stopped the practice because people were taking the oil home and then never coming back. The implication was that it should not be used as a “fix” for an immediate problem, but rather was intended as an *isca*, a “bait.” A Brazilian pastor in Cancún went further, complaining that sometimes people would come to church with a particular problem and “once their problem had been solved” they never return.

The relationships of reciprocity with followers are symbolic, or of token value: they weigh heavily even though followers are told firmly not to expect any kind of return from their tithes and donations. Indeed, the bishop in charge of their church in Tel Aviv spoke to me explicitly on this point saying I should not confuse donations with a membership fee, and that “sacrifice” is a better term. Often on leaving church, one receives tokens, mementoes, and small devices, such as a tiny plastic chalice or a small piece of cotton fabric, gestures that seem designed to create a sense of obligation on the part of recipients in the hope that they will return, and that they will make donations or become tithers (*dizimistas*). Indeed the fact that they are not ostentatious, makes these devices all the more effective, because the reciprocity involved is low cost: a recipient will not feel obliged to make an onerous sacrifice in return. But if they do return and reciprocate, that could form the basis for a longer-term relationship. The element of ritual at the root of the relationship underlines the symbolic character of the initial gesture, yet the expectation of “getting something in return” is not dispelled. In short, while pastors deny the expectation of reciprocity and insist on the purely symbolic character of ritual, other indications, such as the videos of people who achieve financial security after renouncing all their worldly possessions (presumably donating them to the church itself), do hold out the hope of material rewards, especially for donations. As if to illustrate this mixed messaging, the church in Cancún showed a video about an entrepreneur whose construction business was on the verge of collapse until he sold off his possessions and gave them to the church, after which contracts started to flow—and he continued to give generously to the church. Judging by the apparently unlimited resources at the disposal of the church, this technique of gently prodding people into a sense of guilt seems to be quite successful.

The phrase *urbi et orbi* at the head of this section alludes to the UCKG’s recourse to Catholic rituals and performance in designing its own procedures, thus also underlining the extent to which neo-Pentecostalism represents a deviation from its Pentecostal source, which rejects Catholic doctrine and practice as “pagan.” The UCKG has fashioned the Lord’s Supper ritual to make it resemble

the Catholic communion using language surprisingly close to that of transubstantiation, while also quoting Saint Paul to the effect that the ritual contains “the bread and wine of sincerity.”²⁸

The church also replicates Catholic traditions by building impressively sized temples located in prominent places and fronted by simplified neoclassical arches and portals, and by conferring the title of bishop on its senior clergy. Somewhat like priests, the pastors are built up into a caste apart from the assistants and from the followers, and unlike other Pentecostal churches, the IURD hierarchy exercises a degree of control over its pastors’ personal lives. For example, pastors are encouraged to marry assistants or at least church members, and those in Brazil can, on recommendation of a pastor, join a dating app to find a suitable partner. The apartness is notable in the exclusion of women from pastor status, the guidance not to have children, the requirement that *obreiros* and *obreiras* wear uniforms, and in the standardized dress code.

These are indications that the Universal Church leadership aspires to replace the Catholic Church as the de facto hegemon in Brazil’s religious field (though not elsewhere) and, by emulating it, to gain legitimacy and official state recognition. This strategy involves challenging Catholicism’s privileged status even within the *laïcité* that governs relations between religion and the state in Brazil and most Spanish American countries, while at the same time claiming preferential status and immunities as a religious institution.

The church resembles Catholicism in conferring on its followers a universalist citizenship, standardizing its hierarchical system and its ritual procedures across the world, but it differs from Catholicism in its avoidance of concessions to local cultures. Whereas Catholicism is omnipresent in Latin America’s cultural *métissage*, as in carnivals and fiestas that borrow from indigenous traditions, the Universal Church, like other Pentecostal churches, has nothing to do with what they regard as pagan practices.

In Europe it also stands in contrast to the prevalence of Pentecostal churches identified with one or another African country—notably Ghana and Nigeria.²⁹ At the Finsbury Park UCKG church in London there are first- and second-generation migrants from all over West Africa, and smaller numbers “originally” from the Caribbean and other parts of the world, but color and nationality receive little attention from pastors or in conversations with followers, save for the provision of services in Portuguese and Spanish, which in any case bring together people from diverse places such as Brazil and Angola as well as from Spain and the many countries of Spanish America. I have noticed that whereas in Brazil the pastors pay much attention to the dangerous and occult influence of possession cults, labeled *cultos de matriz africana*³⁰ by anthropologists, in London no mention is made of indigenous African religion, even though in West

Africa itself their denunciation as dangerous forces of evil is a core feature of Pentecostalism.³¹

A global mediatic reach

The church and TV Record are closely intertwined financially, but the involvement of church personnel in programmes is confined to nighttime religious broadcasts and the biblical novelas. As I observed when I visited the studios outside Rio de Janeiro in 2023, the filming of novelas is accompanied by a pastoral couple who work together with professional scriptwriters, directors, and actors from the mainstream world of television. (The pastor's wife was closely involved in scriptwriting and filming.) The team also included an image consultant trained in Paris and Brazil as well as a church member. More recently the influence of the professional scriptwriters may have been diluted due to the involvement of Macedo's daughter Christiane Cardoso and the dismissal of professional scriptwriters in 2024.

The novelas are a commercial venture designed to entertain a broad public. They are quite different from the stern admonitions of pastors who emphasize the threatening forces of evil and repeatedly exhort their listeners to make sacrifices for their own sakes and that of the church. In the words of Brazilian blogger Nilson Xavier, "Record has learnt that [...] a modern novela with religious preaching and limited 'soap-style' appeal only reaches the church's captive audience," whereas a biblical novela in period dress and staging modelled on a stereotypical concept of life in ancient times can achieve success among the wider public. This was in evidence with *Jesus* (2018), coming after numerous Old Testament-based novelas from *Genesis* through *The Ten Commandments* to the Books of Kings and the Book of Esther. Like its predecessors, *Jesus* was broadcast over a very long period—counting 200 episodes—and by the end registered the third largest number of viewers in the São Paulo region (behind Globo and a SBT children's program), producing a 30% spike in Record's own audience.³² The novelas are also broadcast dubbed in English, and in Spanish in Colombia, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Panama, and Bolivia, as well as in the US on the Hispanic subscription channel Univisión which has been broadcasting them for many years in prime time and in 2019 reached a peak of 1.9 million households.

The blogger's point is confirmed by the disappointing results of the one explicitly "doctrinal" or didactic novela produced after 2000—*Apocalypse* (2018)—in which the comfortable lifestyle of modernity is eroded by war and violence until in the end civilization is destroyed, ushering in the millennium,

the return of Jesus and the establishment of peace on earth—all combined with a strong pro-Israel message.

In Manoela Carpenedo's summary, these narratives are connected with the Neo-Pentecostal doctrine that the world is in the grip of "spiritual warfare" opposing God to the satanic forces of evil. Non-Pentecostal religious traditions such as Catholic cults, Afro-Brazilian divinities, are demonized. The Catholic Church itself nurtures the Antichrist at its heart and the "Holy Father" is a corrupt and power-hungry Pope, guiding the Antichrist under the direction of Satan and capable of even murder. The Virgin Mary is the "Virgin of the Sacred Light," object of a cult whose adepts even engage in pedophilia.³³

When it began religious programming, Record followed an evangelizing, didactic agenda, promoting the church, broadcasting services, discussions of moral issues, showing films of biblical heroes, and denouncing *macumba* as the work of the devil. Eventually, in 2015 they began to show the first large-scale biblical production—*The Ten Commandments*, which was so successful that the planned 150 episodes ended up as 242.³⁴ It tells the story from the birth of Moses and his upbringing in Pharaoh's palace through to the epic of the Exodus and the giving of the law. The years in Egypt are full of intrigue in Pharaoh's palace, rivalries with Ramses, forbidden love affairs, poisonings and more, all against the classic novela background of Moses's mysterious origins. Jorge Scola quotes an interview with scriptwriter Vivian de Oliveira, in which she describes vividly how she reworked the biblical story of the Book of Esther for a society where the novelas, broadcast daily, are woven into the fabric of everyday life, with their endless ups and downs and twists and turns, their family dramas about class and paternity, their emphasis on women's protagonism, and not least the real-life dramas of the actors, who become household names.³⁵

To create the characters and parallel plots [...] I used Esther's own story as a starting point. I created a best friend for her [...] I imagined that she would have rivals in the harem... I brought palace eunuchs to life and invented a young Jew who is also in love with Esther, and so on. The Bible, for example, says that Haman, the great villain who hates the Jews, has ten sons. I chose two with pleasant-sounding names, [...] and developed a story for each one.³⁶

Another angle on this point was provided by a bishop who had worked on the production of *Jesus* and explained to me that in the Biblical narrative, characters and personages appear at a late stage in their lives and with little background, or even just in walk-on, yet crucial, parts, and to make the story into a novela the

authors have to build up that background, as for example in the case of Judas Iscariot, who in the Gospel appears “out of nowhere” to play one of the most crucial roles in the whole story, indeed in the whole of human history. (Iscariot is presented from early on as an accountant in Herod’s household.)

Apocalypse, also by Vivian de Oliveira, achieved the lowest audience numbers, and Record has not returned to that style of doctrinal novela.³⁷ Unlike *Apocalypse*, which depicts personages in contemporary dress embodying forces of good and evil, the other novelas are cast in ancient settings, with superhuman figures like the angel Gabriel and Satan himself clearly set apart: in *Jesus*, the angel announcing to Mary that she will give birth to the Messiah is shrouded in light and wears a white cape, while a dark, androgynous figure in a black cape and hood looms in various scenes silently projecting the threat of evil forces and speaking only once, at the temptation of Jesus.

The distinctive feature of the other novelas is their dual sourcing in the Bible stories and the classic themes of Brazilian novelas, as intimated in my characterization of *The Ten Commandments*, namely family dysfunction, political rivalry, and violence. This even applies to *Jesus*, in the intrigues at Herod’s court, in the many transgressive Roman-Jewish love affairs. Projecting modern politics back into Jesus’s times, the High Priests are portrayed as pantomime villains collaborating with the (imperialist) Roman regime against the Jesus movement fighting for liberation from a hated foreign occupying power.

The biblical novelas also reproduce the protagonism of women, a pervasive feature in the novela industry. For example, in *Jesus*, when Mary, a teenager in love and publicly committed to marry Joseph, gets visibly pregnant, she has a lot of explaining to do in the village and the neighbors come near to stoning her. Later in life she anguishes over the possibility that she is giving preference to Jesus over her other sons—especially James who for a long time resents Jesus and refuses to give credence to his messianic status while courting the daughter of a corrupt High Priest. In chapter 18 of the novela, she asks her daughter:

“did I do wrong by any of you or your siblings [...] all that resentment they hold towards Jesus... if they only knew how privileged they were to grow up next to him [...]. You think that all they went through, and the archangel Gabriel, was a lie?”

Or in the reproving words of a female relative: “Mary dedicated herself to each one of you with love and affection and if she treated Jesus differently, I’m so sorry, that is because he’s different. Your brother is the Messiah and it wasn’t Mary or Joseph who asked for this. They were chosen and wanted that.”

The portrayal of Mary as a middle-aged woman is itself a break with the reverential treatment of her as forever young or ageless, famously in Michelangelo's *Pietà* where she looks younger than her son. The intrigues at the courts of Herod and the High Priests are earthy almost to the point of farce, and the producers are not faint-hearted, portraying Herod's infamous wife Herodias as a witch whose sexual machinations (and their failure) culminates in the on-screen exhibition of John the Baptist's severed head.

In comparison with the heavy dispensationalist message of *Apocalypse* (launched five years later), *Jesus* is certainly light on doctrine. But it is not light on miracles or on the message of faith that comes with them such as the "miracle of the bleeding woman," which appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and is often quoted by pastors.³⁸ The woman is healed merely by touching Jesus's cloak and each time the (English) text uses the same phrase, as do the pastors: "your faith has healed you." That simple message threads through a narrative full of emotional, familial, and political tension, often stretched out over slow and even ponderous sequences.

3. Stripped-down religion as part of a cultural project

In the words of anthropologist Ari Pedro Oro, the IURD is engaged in a reconfiguration of religion.³⁹ This is evidenced by the stripped-down character of its ritual procedures, which still echo a Christian and Catholic heritage, but have been shorn of ceremonials and also of a liturgical framing, for services are conducted seamlessly by a pastor speaking for up to two hours without interruption, notes, or a prayer book. Pastors rely extensively on Biblical quotations and stories, but there is nothing resembling a prayer book.

In contrast with ritual in the style consecrated by centuries of Catholic and post-Reformation practice, this church has developed a highly distinctive style, instantly recognizable in the high-pitched and high-volume hectoring oratory of its pastors, in the unabashed openness of its exorcisms, and in the brazenness of its funding appeals. It stands apart among Pentecostal churches in both the conduct and content of its services, and also in the highly unusual degree of centralization and allocation of personnel at the global level as well as of decision-making, which extends from fixing the dates of fasts and commemorations to the design of ritual practices.

Macedo's approach to politics seems parallel rather than subordinate to the church and, when added to his media and business empire, the three must be conceived as parts of a cultural and business project of very substantial dimensions set on a path of perpetual growth: temples are being built worldwide,

membership grows, and the media operation, despite profitability issues recently in Brazil, projects itself ever further internationally. The political and business projects can be understood in terms of standard features of Brazilian politics and business, but the church itself is highly unusual. Compared to other Pentecostal operations, it has achieved a highly unusual degree of institutionalization which will allow it to outlive its founder and his media and business empire. If that does indeed come to pass, then the phrase “reconfiguration of religion” will prove to be well founded. The obvious comparison is with the Assemblies of God, but the Assemblies follow a decentralized confederal model in which local churches receive support in setting themselves up and benefit from the shared brand, but otherwise are independent.

The Universal Church defies the conventions of Brazil’s *laïcité* by its political and business activities, though it does not seek to impose on the country a regime of sexual morality or religious education. It defies the secularism of hegemonic churches and modern ways of handling ritual by striking an ambiguous posture between the literal (as with healing) and the figurative (as in Austin’s and Rappaport’s speech acts). Its pastors and their wives conduct themselves both as counsellors or bearers of lifestyle advice even while inciting their listeners to experience the Holy Spirit as a “real presence” and Satan as a threat to their tranquility and security.

But if I write somewhat portentously of the reconfiguration of religion, I also have to say that it may never bring about the deep social change that the phrase implies or that one might have expected in the nearly fifty years since this church was founded and the more than a hundred years since Pentecostalism erupted on the world stage. One reason for this—and one on which I speculated already in 1996—is that neither Pentecostalism nor this more articulated and institutionally mature neo-Pentecostalism offer a redemptive message for society, or the world, as a whole, such as the universalist message of Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism.⁴⁰ The Universal Church speaks to its own people and asks others to join in and become part of its own very hierarchical and mobilized community. It also encourages a culture of hermeticism and secretiveness that renders its message opaque and emphasizes the selectiveness of the path to salvation or redemption. However hard you try, the Holy Spirit is never quite within your reach, and your sacrifices offer no guarantee. That phrase “there is no guarantee,” which is my phrase, sums up well the message its pastors transmit across the world. For all the triumphalism of some and the pessimism of others in the face of the decline of Catholic attendance in Europe and Latin America and the evangelical “tsunami” which we have watched for many decades, Pentecostalism may have but limited impact. Indeed, its supposed effect of driving politics to the right in so many countries may be a misinter-

pretation: it is after all just as possible that the evangelical vote is following a broader rightwards trend.⁴¹

This is why when the Pope dies the whole world looks to Rome, but when a Pentecostal preacher dies, however prominent, no one except their close followers cares very much.

Notes

1. This is a substantially revised and abridged version of an article published in Spanish as “La Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus: Uma máquina de motivação” in *Sociedad y religión* (Buenos Aires), 34: 64 (2024). <https://ojs.ceil-conicet.gov.ar/index.php/sociedadreligion/article/view/1383>
2. A name derived from Ecclesiasticus 46:9: “The Lord gave strength also unto Caleb, which remained with him unto his old age: so that he entered upon the high places of the land, and his seed obtained it for an heritage.”
3. Paul Freston, “History, Current Reality and Prospects of Pentecostalism in Latin America,” in Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Paul Freston, and Stephen Dove (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 430-50.
4. Virginia Garrard, *New Faces of God in Latin America: Emerging Forms of Vernacular Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
5. “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord [...] the entire tenth of the herd and flock, every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd’s rod—will be holy to the Lord.” Pastors often quote a passage from the prophet Malachi 3:10 where the 10 per cent limit is not mentioned: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store.” The word *tithe* itself (*dizimo* in Portuguese) is rooted in taxes paid to the Christian Church in the European Middle Ages.
6. <https://www.universal.org/endereco/sao-paulo-templo-de-salomao-19491/>
7. Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Fulton Street Brooklyn, April 2021.
8. Ari Oro and Marcelo Tadvald, “A Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus e a reconfiguração do espaço público religioso brasileiro,” *Ciencias Sociales y Religión/Ciências Sociais e Religião*, 17: 76 (2015), p. 85. Douglas Tavolaro, *O bispo: a história revelada de Edir Macedo* (São Paulo: Larousse, 2007), p. 161.
9. Gilberto Nascimento, *O reino: A história de Edir Macedo e uma radiografia da Igreja Universal* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019).
10. André Ricardo de Souza, *O cristianismo brasileiro contemporâneo: aspectos econômicos, assistenciais, políticos e ecumênicos* (São Carlos: EdUFSCar, 2024).
11. One possible exception is Angola, where the government expelled 34 UCKG missionaries in 2021, but it seems that was a response to issues other than the church’s involvement in politics (see below).
12. Parties draw up lists but do not draw up a hierarchy of names on the list, so if a candidate gets more than the number of votes needed for election—for example more than

- 200,000 votes in a constituency of a million voters and five seats—the surplus goes to the party’s next best placed candidate for the party. Gabriela Figueiredo Netto and Bruno Wilhelm Speck, “O dinheiro importa menos para os candidatos evangélicos?” *Opinião Pública*, 23: 3 (2017), pp. 809-36.
13. Claudia Cerqueira, “Igreja como partido: A relação entre a Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus e o Republicanos,” *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais [online]*, 36: 107 (2021), p. 6.
 14. According to Wikipedia he is a Roman Catholic but also a Freemason (which the Catholic Church forbids).
 15. Edir Macedo and Carlos Oliveira, *Plano de poder: Deus, os cristãos e a política* (Rio de Janeiro: Thomas Nelson Brasil, 2008).
 16. See Wikipedia entry for Carlos Rodrigues and *O Globo* (June 4, 2023). None of the reports mention benefits to the church itself of his involvement in these rackets, one of which (the *mensalão*) was designed to ease the passage of the Lula government’s legislative programme. Another was known as the “mafia das ambulâncias” and involved over-invoicing and rigged tenders for sales of ambulances to regional and local governments, master-minded by federal Deputies and Health Ministry officials.
 17. Rubem Cesar Fernandes, et al., *Novo nascimento: os Evangélicos em casa, na igreja e na política* (Rio de Janeiro: ISER, Mauad, 1998), p. 125. Souza, *O cristianismo brasileiro contemporâneo*.
 18. For example, Edna Macedo, sister of Edir, who is currently a São Paulo State Assembly member, having previously been a Federal Deputy for another party, posts her activities on the Republicanos website, mostly focused on health and women’s issues, as well as briefly flagging her evangelical adherence.
 19. *Portal R7*, “Universal completa 43 anos com 10 milhões de fiéis pelo mundo,” July 9, 2020. <https://noticias.r7.com/brasil/universal-completa-43-anos-com-10-milhoes-de-fieis-pelo-mundo-09072020/>
 20. “Localizar,” *Universal*, accessed July 6, 2025. <https://www.universal.org/localizar>
 21. Interview, April 2023.
 22. Interview, February 20, 2023.
 23. There have been accusations and even court cases in Brazil alleging that the church compels pastors to undergo the procedure, and not always in hygienic conditions, but most cases have been dismissed. They were brought in Labor Courts for the most part. Gilberto Nascimento, “Exclusivo: por dentro da máquina de vasectomias da universal,” *Intercept Brasil*, April 17, 2023. <https://www.intercept.com.br/2023/04/17/a-maquina-de-vasectomias-da-universal/>
 24. Edlaine de Campos Gomes, *A era das catedrais: A autenticidade em exibição* (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2011).
 25. A source of water was found in the precincts of the Templo de Salomão and a well was built. After pastors had spent several days praying over it, water was drawn and bottled and distributed to the faithful in São Paulo and beyond. (Observation in July 2023).
 26. “‘A Água dos Maiores Milagres’: oração no ‘Poço de Jacó’ no Templo de Salamão,” posted on January 4, 2023, recorded on January 2, 2023, by Portal Universal, YouTube, 3 min. 29 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lg4jkuKttzE>.
 27. The same words appeared in the church’s newspaper *Folha Universal*, January 15, 2023. “Jacob’s Well” is an allusion to the place where patriarch Jacob met his future wives, Rachel and Leah (Genesis 29). “Busque a Água dos Maiores Milagres,” *Universal*,

- January 15, 2023. <https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/busque-a-agua-dos-maiores-milagres/>
28. Finsbury Park, Rainbow Theatre, Sunday, September 18, 2022. Paul admonishes the Corinthians saying “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:20-27).
 29. Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise: African Christians in Europe* (Fairwater, Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998); Stephen Hunt and Nicola Lightly, “The British Black Pentecostal ‘Revival’: Identity and Belief in the ‘New’ Nigerian Churches,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24: 1 (2001), pp. 104-124; Girish Daswani, *Looking Back, Moving Forward: Transformation and Ethical Practice in the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).
 30. Africa-originating religions.
 31. Peter Geschiere, *Sorcellerie et politique en Afrique: la viande des autres* (Paris: Karthala, 1995); Birgit Meyer, “‘Make a Complete Break with the Past’: Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28: 3 (1998), pp. 316-349; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1999).
 32. Nilson Xavier, “Novela ‘Jesus,’ da Record, faz o maior sucesso nos Estados Unidos,” *UOL*, April 21, 2019, <https://tvefamosos.uol.com.br/blog/nilsonxavier/2019/04/21/novela-jesus-da-record-faz-o-maior-sucesso-nos-estados-unidos/>; and Ricardo Feltrin, “Novela ‘Jesus’ termina e eleva em 27% a audiência da Record no país, *UOL*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.uol.com.br/splash/noticias/ooops/2019/04/18/novela-jesus-termina-e-eleva-em-27-a-audiencia-da-record-no-pais.htm>. SBT is another channel.
 33. Manoela Carpenedo, “Mobilizing Zionist and Philo-Semitic Sentiments through Melodrama: Brazilian Biblical Telenovelas in the Production of a Neo-Pentecostal Political Culture,” paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association Congress, Bogotá, 2024.
 34. Jorge Scola, “A teledramaturgia bíblica pela TV Record: Sentidos e mediações a partir da produção da mensagem,” *Ciencias Sociales y Religión/ Ciências Sociais e Religião*, 19: 27 (2017): pp. 47-71.
 35. Lisa Beljuli Brown, *Body Parts on Planet Slum: Women and Television in Brazil* (London: Anthem Press, 2011).
 36. Scola, “A teledramaturgia bíblica pela TV Record,” p. 62.
 37. Record’s other novelas up to then, starting in 2010, were: *Esther*, *The Ten Commandments*, then *Samson and Delilah*, *King David*, *The Miracles of Jesus*, *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, and *The Promised Land*. See “Apocalypse chega ao fim como produção bíblica menos vista da Record,” *UOL*, June 25, 2018. <https://noticiasdatv.uol.com.br/noticia/audiencias/apocalipse-chega-ao-fim-como-producao-biblica-menos-vista-da-record-21120?cpid=txt>.
 38. Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48.
 39. Oro and Tadvall, “A Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus,” pp. 76-113.
 40. David Lehmann, *Struggle for the Spirit: Religious Transformation and Popular Culture in Brazil and Latin America* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1996).
 41. In fact, Catholicism is growing fast in Africa and in Asia. The US is, so to speak, “another story,” a big exception to worldwide trends on several counts.