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ANXIETY AND RECIPROCITY: THE
UNIVERSAL CHURCH OF THE KINGDOM OF
GOD ACROSS FRONTIERS

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Introduction¹

The data on which this paper is based have been gathered since 2019 in establishments belonging to the Universal Church in the following cities: London, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Santos, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, Oaxaca, Cancún, Tel Aviv, Groningen, Amsterdam, Vancouver, Toronto, Brussels, Paris and Brooklyn New York. The venue I have frequented most is the UK headquarters at the former Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park, North London, which the church bought in 1995 for a reported GBP 2.25 million (USD 4.45 million in today's money)² and restored at great expense. My conversations have been mainly with pastors and assistants (*obreiros*). Only very occasionally could they be described as interviews agreed in advance with notetaking and sometimes they were very short because, with a few exceptions, my interlocutors did not like to discuss much more than generalities, preferring to see me as a potential follower. I usually tell pastors I am doing research,

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 - 2 MCKIE, John. (1995), "Media mogul's church buys historic Rainbow rock venue". *The Independent*, 26 October 1995. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/media-mogul-s-church-buys-historic-rainbow-rock-venue-1579485.html>. Accessed 14/01/2024.

but for quite a long time at the Rainbow Theatre I did not declare my interest until eventually I obtained an interview with the bishop, who heads the church in the UK. On my last visit an *obreira* asked “How is your book going?”

My work does not involve interviews with followers, except for occasional conversations. Thus, I am constructing a depiction of the church’s faithful as shaped by the discourse of the pastors. It is not my intention to assert that many or most of the faithful are tormented by the double binds and forces of evil highlighted in my description of pastoral discourse. Rather, my purpose is to elucidate the ideas, especially about the supernatural, that frame the church’s communication with its followers. It should be evident that there is much more to explore regarding its financial relationship with them, the various groups they are encouraged to engage with, spanning across different demographics such as young people, older individuals, women, and men. Additionally, there is more to delve into regarding the church’s political engagements in Brazil, and its leader’s business empire.

The subject of the paper is the UCKG worldwide. Its website carries addresses in 124 countries.³ I treat it as a single institution because it operates a centralized system in which the majority of pastors are Brazilian, the themes of daily services are standardized, and ritual procedures are synchronized. Pastors and their wives in all countries attend a weekly Thursday address online from the founder and leader, Edir Macedo. Pastors are all required to be married but in the vast majority of cases have no children. They adopt a consistent and highly distinctive style of oratory which is one of the church’s “trade marks”. The many similarities binding pastors and the style of *culto* (worship) across the world show that the leadership exercises detailed oversight, and ensures loyalty and uniformity of practices by various mechanisms including the periodic relocation of pastors (sometimes at short notice) from region to region and country to country. The Record TV empire owned by Macedo has extended its reach into Spanish and English language broadcasts of its biblical *novelas*, and the church operates a subscription-based channel UniverVideo as well as YouTube channels, and Instagram and Facebook pages in Portuguese and English and other languages. We know almost nothing of the financial management of the church’s very substantial resources, except what is contained in the well documented book by investigative journalist Gilberto Nascimento (Nascimento 2019).

Methodological considerations

In the 1990s and early 2000s the UCKG was associated in the minds of the secular intelligentsia – as displayed in the pages of the *Folha de São Paulo* for instance – with the Prosperity Gospel, with instant healing, and with insistent appeals for cash from its hard-pressed followers. Ricardo Mariano, in one of his many publications described neo-Pentecostal churches in general as follows:

3 The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) homepage. Available at: <https://www.uckg.org/uckg-worldwide-addresses/>.

Daí seus cultos basearem-se na oferta especializada de serviços mágico-religiosos, de cunho terapêutico e taumatúrgico, centrados em promessas de concessão divina de prosperidade material, cura física e emocional e de resolução de problemas familiares, afetivos, amorosos e de sociabilidade (Mariano 2004:124).

And he described how the UCKG *crente*

se torna, nos termos de Edir Macedo, sócio de Deus e, somente nessa posição privilegiada, pode passar a desfrutar das bênçãos e promessas divinas. De sua parte, os pastores não só incentivam tal arriscada demonstração de fé como garantem que os desafios são investimentos de alto retorno. De modo que tais crenças sobre dízimos e ofertas, invariavelmente, encerram cálculos utilitários, tanto da parte de quem paga quanto da de quem recebe e administra os recursos. Na condição de dizimistas e ofertantes, os fiéis almejam adquirir e exercer o direito de cobrar do próprio Deus o pronto cumprimento de Suas promessas bíblicas: vida saudável, próspera, feliz e vitoriosa (Mariano 2004:129).

In this perspective there was no place for ritual, for symbolism, or for the anguish of those who seek the Spirit. Nor was there any place for the deeply pessimistic view of human nature and its vulnerability to the machinations of the powers of evil as enunciated by pastors and as they appear in the writings of Macedo. Pastors' warnings that there is no point in prayers and donations motivated by a material reward have come later. Likewise, a 2014 contribution by Jacqueline Moraes Teixeira on the church's far-reaching women's movement, Godllywood,⁴ led by Macedo's daughter, Christiane Cardoso, which is very active on Instagram, Facebook and on UniverVideo, and gives its name and guidance to women's groups in every local temple, at least in principle, emphasizing the performative dimension of its message. In Teixeira's account the message is primarily conveyed online educating women in a conventional and disciplined manner of presenting themselves to the world, but by now the message has become more diverse and "modern" (Teixeira 2014).

For some observers, the church is neoliberal and anti-feminist, despite the idea of female empowerment that Christiane and the Godllywood educators like to advocate (Marchesi, Rosa and Resende 2021). Macedo himself is quoted saying that "the man" suffers from the curse of his designation, already in the book of Genesis,

4 Godllywood is the name and brand of a set of initiatives aimed at empowering women. These initiatives range from an active presence on Instagram and Facebook, led by Christiane Cardoso, daughter of Edir Macedo, with a million followers, to groups of women organized in each temple around the world. The central activity of the followers involves fulfilling, in pairs, challenges and tasks in different dimensions of daily life. Although the Church considers Godllywood a movement, the emphasis is more on personal performance and commitment to raising the banner of "Holiness to the Lord" than on collective action.

as the provider, and the woman's task is to support him, while also, as his fragile and submissive partner, looking to him as her protector and praying for him when he falls into temptation:

Caso o cônjuge seja “endiabrado”: se for mulherengo; bêbado; perverso; malcriado? (...) De que modo conviver com tal situação? Você diz para si mesma que vai à igreja, ora pelo marido e parece que quanto mais ora, pior ele fica. (Macedo 2012:49-50)

O bispo, então, dá as instruções de como a mulher deve agir: “A posição da mulher é a mesma da Igreja: submissa; dócil; bondosa; cheia de amor e alegria; esperando por seu marido assim como a Igreja espera pelo Senhor Jesus.

And they paraphrase the anthropologist Maria das Dores Campos Machado (Machado 2005) as follows:

O arranjo familiar que emerge tem como fulcro, paradoxalmente, a mulher simultaneamente submissa e agente da salvação da família. A mulher deve apresentar-se como esposa dócil e submissa ao marido, mas tem papel fundamental em engendrar a prosperidade do seu lar ...os homens tendem mais à conversão religiosa quando se sentem ameaçados em sua masculinidade. Encontram nos átrios religiosos o reconforto e consolidação do papel social patriarcal que se assenta sobre a métrica do protagonismo masculino ... na racionalidade iurdiana, a mulher é colocada na condição importante, porém subordinada, da função de servir ao marido e à família, cabendo-lhe a responsabilidade do êxito familiar, entendido principalmente como prosperidade econômica e indissolubilidade do matrimônio (Marchesi, Rosa and Resende 2021:111-112).

The article states that the Universal Church advocates a division of labour in which the man leads and the woman is in a submissive role to the point even of denying her own sexual desires,⁵ and the authors find an instance in which Macedo says, in public and disapprovingly, that if a woman has a doctorate and finds a partner

5 In a newsletter dated 24 February 2010 and in other places Macedo has written in praise of sexual intimacy and its contribution to a happy marriage, quoting St Paul and the Book of Proverbs in support. His daughter and her husband also write of the subject in their book *Matrimônio Blindado*, but they warn against premature sex during courtship outside marriage. In a blog in English entitled 'Discipline in 21 Ways' Cristiane Cardoso writes of the 'Godly way to date... the worldly type of dating is... you meet, you want to move in... you have intimate relations... and if it does not work out you move on, whereas the Christian way is about getting married... to make this other person to be happy should be the focus... people whose focus is on their own happiness will fail because it is the wrong way to go in to the relationship... you have to focus on making the other person happy...' Available at : <https://www.universal.org/en/bispo-macedo/marital-intimacy/>.

with a lower level of qualification then he would not be the head, and if she were the head she would not be serving God's will. For the authors, this is a combination of neoliberalism and traditional family values designed to counteract women's autonomy (Marchesi, Rosa and Resende 2021:115).

I have no doubt regarding the authenticity of these quotations, taken from the mass market magazine *Revista Forum*, but they do not take into account the ambiguities present in many writings and pronouncements by Macedo, his daughter Christiane Cardoso, and son-in-law Renato Cardoso, as well as by church pastors. These ambiguities are evident in the book *Matrimônio Blindado*, authored by them, which pays significant attention to male weakness, the crisis of masculinity, and the challenges it presents to women, even as they affirm themselves as feminists who "want to destroy the family" and argue that men must be enabled to fulfil their role as its head. Since they are not engaged in the production of a systematic body of thought, capturing the "iurdian" (from the Portuguese acronym IURD – Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus) philosophy on the basis of their texts is not easy. The authors are nevertheless right to emphasise the performative aspects of the church's activities online, in prayer halls, in prisons, hospitals, and elsewhere.

We can also find inspiration in Patricia Birman, who, already in the 1990s, demonstrated the insights that emerge when the question of gender incorporates the lives of church followers as they engage with the supernatural. Her observations came from areas of Rio de Janeiro where family life was subject to severe socio-economic vulnerability and disruption by the *tráfico*, and although gender is not the main subject of this paper her approach is relevant. In those circumstances she found that

Em primeiro lugar emerge a figura da mulher que nitidamente é construída em termos religiosos como uma figura de mediação; em segundo lugar, percebemos que essa mediação propicia formas de relação com a igreja e suas práticas que buscam conciliar um estatuto de não crente com benefícios advindos de práticas rituais diversas. O trabalho de mediação feminina não é de forma alguma inócua do ponto de vista do sentido das práticas religiosas no mundo evangélico: provoca alterações no seu modelo. (Birman 1996b:207)

Once mothers and wives who attend church regularly have undergone the ritual of *libertação*, that is, of exorcising the evil spirits implanted by their lives as practitioners and adepts of possession cults, they remain as *figuras de mediação* (mediating personages) enabling the men in their family to live as what economists call "free riders" trusting their mothers and wives to control their demons when necessary. The maternal authority in the family conducts rituals like anointing their wayward sons when they get into trouble, and in this way

buscam compatibilizar com a esfera religiosa aqueles que se encontram possuídos por entes malignos. O objetivo da atividade ritual de salvar traz essa dimensão relativa à concepção do Mal em presença - esse circula e antes de tudo é preciso se dispor a amarrá-lo, vale dizer, exercer um controle ritual que se confunde com o papel da mulher na família (Birman 1996b:216).

Much has changed since the 1990s, not least in the relationship between the *tráfico* and evangelical churches, as Christina Vital has shown (Manso 2023; Vital da Cunha 2015), but I quote Birman's paper because my own approach tries to take account of the supernatural dimension of the lives of people who attend the IURD. This is difficult because I have found the obstacles to interviewing followers to be almost insurmountable. I have not been invited into their homes for example, and have not observed their domestic life in the way Patricia Birman did, and she has not had many imitators since then. Recently, however, our understanding of the church and the lives of its followers has been enriched by Alana Souza, based on several years of engagement with the church in Recife and patient long-term acquaintance with pastors, *obreiras* (assistants) and *fiéis* (Souza 2021).⁶

I start from the premise that many people who attend services at the Universal Church are looking for an experience that will transport them into a world where supernatural causation will replace the exchanges that regulate everyday life, and so my subject is the uncertain path trodden by pastors and followers between the supernatural and the material. This paper describes how the church, through the oratory of its pastors, seeks to create among its followers a state of anxiety in the face of the forces of evil at work in their lives, and a double-edged relationship with an inscrutable and unpredictable God.

The ritual of baptism, the Holy Spirit and the double bind

In the Universal Church, to receive the Holy Spirit is a permanent aspiration that can never be entirely fulfilled. Followers implore the Holy Spirit to descend upon them; they aspire to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, but this baptism is but a moment on a journey that can never be entirely concluded. Baptism by immersion in a river or a pool may seal a person's membership of the church, but it does not signify completion, and it does not mean baptism in the Spirit, in the "full" sense.

The Brazilian pastor in Nazareth in Israel, where his potential followers are not Jews but Arab Christians, told me in April 2022 that sometimes people are baptised

⁶ *Obreiros* are an essential part of the organization of Pentecostal churches. They perform a wide range of tasks ranging from teaching Sunday school to keeping the premises in good order and patrolling the churches during services. In the UCKG they can be counted in their tens of thousands worldwide, the women among them wear uniforms and the men follow a standard dress code of dark suits, leather shoes, shirt and tie. In English they are called assistants.

quickly - soon after they start to attend. So he gets them off to a swimming pool, or a river, anywhere, and baptizes them. Long drawn out preparation is not a prerequisite, but nor does baptism by immersion guarantee the true presence of the Spirit in that person. He said evidence of that is to be seen in the “aura” exuded by a person. But he also advised discretion: it is “not something one talks about”.

Another Brazilian pastor, this time speaking to the faithful at the Fulton Street church in Brooklyn, New York, used almost the same words, telling us that when we go about our lives we bear witness not by what we say, but by showing our inner selves, by a light shining from within. A person dies and is born again; they put aside their old life. To redescribe the presence of the Spirit in more tangible terms, the Nazareth pastor told his own story as an example: he got rid of his houses in Brazil and in Israel (possibly donating the proceeds to the church), put aside frivolities and bad habits and dedicated himself to God and the church, eventually giving up his job.⁷ There is no ritual nor any sign that definitively, let alone objectively, marks a person with the presence of the Spirit.

Yet a Prayer Group meeting I attended in London led me to wonder if it is quite so ineffable, for on that occasion the *obreira* gave us tasks to do “except those who have the Holy Spirit” as if it was a bureaucratic category. On another occasion I asked that same *obreira* a question typical of my excessively literal secularist/empiricist cast of mind: “what is the difference between being ‘baptized in the Spirit’ and ‘receiving the Spirit?’” Although theologically minded interlocutors might have responded to the terms in which the question was framed, to this person it must have seemed absurd: that is, I was asking her to define the undefinable or to describe a state of mind or of the soul as if it was an item to be picked off a shelf. Alana Souza reports an uncannily similar exchange in Recife:

Finding out among my interlocutors how they knew they had received the Holy Spirit was initially difficult because of a, now clear, methodological error I was making then I asked them “How does a person feel when he receives the Holy Spirit?”. Most of them told me they did not feel anything, and that there was no explanation, they just knew. (Souza 2021:301)

During prayer meetings congregants implore the Holy Spirit, sometimes loudly, to descend upon them: no one is thinking “oh well, I have the Holy Spirit so now I don’t have to pray for it”. The preaching does not refer to possession of the Holy Spirit as a permanent state in this life. That can never be certain: we are told that to save our souls we should engage in a thorough transformation of ourselves in this world, to be born again, but also that there is “no guarantee”. In this life we must constantly keep watch on our behaviour, and guard against the devil for whom people who have received the Spirit are a prize target. The Spirit marks a rupture in

⁷ He had come to Israel as a professional footballer and then remained as a football scout. During that time he was already member of the church.

our lives, opening up a new beginning, but we know that our personal struggles do not let up and we may backslide. *We can never really know.*

The idea is flexible too: the Spirit may descend independently of a person's actions.⁸

The people whom God chooses are not the ones with Diplomas: they may even have a criminal past and had never thought the Holy Spirit would choose them. (Finsbury Park, 12 August 2021)

Pastors may allude to an exchange relationship, but with a twist: we are exhorted to perform acts of repentance, like the twelve-day Fast of Daniel during which we should forsake superficial pleasures and eat frugally, but we should not fall for the illusion that those sacrifices will bring the blessing of the Holy Spirit, that somehow by fasting we will come to “deserve” it.⁹ On the contrary, we are asking to benefit from an unequal exchange in which

I can give only my broken life, yet in return I want to receive the Holy Spirit that will change my life for ever... If the Holy Spirit is inside you then you will overcome the world. The sin that controlled you no longer controls you. Then nothing is impossible ... Imagine the creator of the whole universe inside you. Once you receive the Holy Spirit you have the power of the creator of Heaven.¹⁰

Still, there is no room for complacency: prayer and vigilance are permanent exigencies.

The church loads its followers with tasks both spiritual and practical: they are under constant pressure: to watch out for their own failings, to watch out for the traps laid by the forces of evil, to pay the tithes that are their obligation and give more on top, to fund-raise, visit the sick, visit hospitals and prisons, go to suicide spots and discourage people who want to kill themselves, to distribute the church's publication *City News* (also published in London in Spanish and in Brazil as *Folha Universal*)... For the core of faithful, belonging is not a once-a-week affair and pastors and assistants bring people into the core by encouraging them to become an assistant or take on responsibilities – for example sorting out vegetables for the weekly “soup kitchen”.

8 The point is illustrated by the incredulity of people who could not understand the popularity of Donald Trump, a man who makes no pretence of living a Christian life, among evangelicals in the US. But the evangelical is quite prepared to believe that an individual can serve as the instrument of the divine will independently of their behaviour or their beliefs.

9 Rainbow Theatre, Finsbury Park, 12 August 2021.

10 Rainbow Theatre, Finsbury Park, 3 April 2022.

You are expected to carry out a lot of this work in support of the church, but *you can never be sure*, and indeed you should not even think that it will bring you baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Prosperity and the Holy Spirit: another double bind

The rhetoric gives with one hand and takes away with the other: pastors call for donations but cast doubt on people's motivations. Prosperity, they say, is an illusion, yet every week a service is dedicated to solving financial problems. In videos shown at the Rainbow Theatre during some services people's experience of rebirth seems to be carefully scripted to deliver an ambiguous message about the connection between success in business and possession of the Holy Spirit, or conversion. Videos shown during services portray people – often married couples – who become aware that their comfortable lifestyle conceals an underlying “emptiness”. They give away all their possessions, presumably to the church, and devote themselves to its work. Later they emerge as a happy family, once again living in comfortable circumstances.

In Cancún (Mexico) I watched a video in which a young businessman tells how after a long period of failure he hoped and prayed for a contract of maybe 30,000 pesos. Instead he was lucky and got one for 60,000, whereupon he made a donation to the church. Not just a donation: he sold everything, even personal possessions like his television set. After that the business really took off and now he had a contract for 13 million. One of the pastors told me that he knew the businessman personally from the time when he had served in the capital, Mexico City. (Pastors do not speak of working for the church but use the expression “servir no altar” – literally to “serve at the altar”).

Those videos convey a relatively cautious message compared with reports from South Africa in which pastors encourage people to think that they can achieve something like a miraculous windfall by making ever larger donations (van Wyk 2014). In the 1990s when I first began to visit UCKG churches, in Salvador da Bahia, I also heard promises of this sort, but in recent years less. At that time one of the most frequently heard mottos in the church was *É só dando que se recebe* – a saying that originated with St Francis.

The faithful are invited to pray and work for financial security, are told of people who found peace and security only after giving away their possessions. Yet they are also told that if their motive for giving is to receive something in return they will get nothing. The pastors themselves, who are role models, have no possessions; they receive not a salary but an allowance (*uma ajuda*)¹¹ and live in accommodation provided by the church. Is this not a battery of double binds?

11 There is currently (January 2024) an argument between the Ministry of Finance and the evangelical members of the Brazilian Congress as to whether such *prebendas*, as they call them in this legal discussion, should be taxed as income. In Brazil I was told that pastors are counted as self-employed, if necessary having use of a car belonging to the church in addition to use of accommodation which is often on the premises of the church.

Rituals of reciprocity

Whereas obscurity and opacity characterize the ceremonial rituals of churches that are heirs to ancient traditions, like the Catholic Church of course, and also of shamans, of *pais* and *mães de santo* in their *terreiros*, or even the incantations one hears in a yoga lesson, in the Universal Church, which prides itself on the rejection of theology and the ponderous rituals it interprets, symbolism is reduced to its minimal expression, direct and explicit. In other contexts, like centers of religious tourism or pilgrimage, items like a *lenço* or a tiny plastic chalice, would be sold as trinkets, souvenirs or mementoes, whereas in the Universal Church they are given out in the expectation that the faithful will return, having for example answered a questionnaire in writing (like “what is troubling you this week?”) or having performed a ritual, like sprinkling blessed water around the house. A relationship of reciprocity is established, building on the sense of guilt that comes with free gifts. The UCKG does not make the Catholic distinction between trinkets and consecrated objects.

In addition to fasting and contributing materially, followers take small, low-cost steps to remove potentially harmful forces, or demons, through a relationship of rolling symbolic reciprocity with the church. In one example, observed in London, New York and São Paulo they take home a rose after the Friday service of deliverance. During a week the rose is to be kept in a symbolically relevant place in the home – like under the marital bed if the problem is a partner’s suspected infidelity. The following Friday congregants bring them back and deposited them on the ground in front of the altar and the pastors take them away to be burnt. In London the burning takes place on the roof of the building, watched simultaneously on the screen above the podium in the church. In the João Diaz cathedral in São Paulo the burning takes place in the garage.

Ceremonials in Catholic churches and in the *terreiros* are expensive. To celebrate Holy Communion, which is free to communicants, the priest must be dressed in his regalia and use consecrated objects.¹² Christenings and baptisms require people to dress up and pay fees, and the ceremonials of candomblé require notoriously large expenditure, for example on elaborate vestments by the *filhas de santo* (women adepts). In contrast to those elaborate and time-honoured procedures, a word to describe the UCKG’s variations on ancient symbols could be simplification. That is, gestures and procedures are invented and discarded, without a pre-history, and are endowed with short-lived, instrumental powers. The idea can be captured in the image of worshippers arriving for a service with a simple, unadorned plastic bottle of water and a loaf of bread representing the essentials of life. Edlaine Gomes, as well as the late Clara Mafra and her colleagues, observed that it is very common to see people leaving a service with *pontos de contato* (mementoes) like sea salt, rose water, or a wrist band. They referred to the Church’s Statutes which make particular

¹² I am aware that the followers of Liberation Theology tend to play down such elaborate formalities.

provisions for “people with an undeveloped faith”, by implication “people who need to learn more about the Christian message”.¹³ (Gomes 2011; Mafra, Swatowski and Sampaio 2012). An *obreiro* I spoke with in a church in Recife in 2011 used the word *isca* (bait) when I inquired naively what such devices might mean. In London members of the congregation take away the image of a decorated goblet entitled “Cup of Salvation” with a quotation from Psalm 116 and a reminder of a meeting at a later date, together with a tiny plastic thimble. In Brazil I have noticed people leaving church with objects such as plastic bags of “blessed water”, to be sprinkled around their homes dispelling harmful spirits.

A rare exception to this simplified quality of rituals, is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (*santa ceia*) during Sunday services: at the Rainbow Theatre assistants distribute a sealed thimble of grape juice and a morsel of bread to all those present; we hold them reverentially in our hands for a few minutes while the pastor recalls the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:19-20). This is one of the UCKG’s few formalized and regular procedures.

The church devotes considerable ingenuity to creating ties of reciprocity though the *pontos de contato*. In Oaxaca, a colonial city and state capital in Mexico, where a Brazilian pastor in his mid-thirties runs a very lively church in yet another disused cinema, the faithful were handed colour-printed leaflets with very precise instructions.¹⁴ Stapled to the leaflet was a plastic bag containing a folded sheet of tissue paper. The instructions were to recite the Lord’s Prayer every day, and to bring the little plastic bag back to church the following Sunday “para tratamento del cielo” (“to attract heaven’s attention”). The absorbent tissue was explained by a quotation from the Book of Revelation 7:17: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes”.¹⁵ The faithful were asked to “bring a bar of soap to church to have it blessed and then wash away your suffering every day in the shower and bring the bar of soap back to church”.¹⁶

In a variation on the same theme, in London at a service in July 2021 congregants were given a handkerchief to take home and instructed to come back a week later. They would return “cleaner” – cleaner before God as they wiped away bad thoughts and lingering resentments.

13 “pessoas imaturas na fé”, implicitamente, aquelas que mais precisam conhecer a mensagem cristã, ... as que precisam de “pontos de contato” [...] para despertarem fé suficiente”. They then quote the Statutes at greater length: “[...] nem todas as pessoas necessitam de “pontos de contato”, mas a maioria precisa, razão pela qual realizamos nas reuniões as correntes e distribuímos gratuitamente coisas ligadas à Palavra de Deus direta ou indiretamente, literal ou simbolicamente, para trazer às pessoas uma confiança, pelo menos um fio de esperança, de fé, e assim levá-las a serem abençoadas” (Estatuto, s/d:66-67 as cited in Mafra, Swatowski & Sampaio 2012:86).

14 Observations from a visit in September 2021.

15 Itself a quotation from Isaiah 25:8

16 Fulton Street Brooklyn, April 2021.

These devices serve both to draw attention to the benefits of church attendance, whether providing relief from suffering or offering a path to the realization of cherished dreams (of love, or wealth, or health...), and also stimulating reciprocity. Examples include the Fast of Daniel and fund-raising campaigns like the annual Campaign of Israel. To strengthen their ability to resist harmful supernatural forces people must deepen their relation of reciprocity with the church, whether symbolically, by bringing a rose or a trinket that has been offered to them, or by writing their thoughts in a notebook.

In the face of the upcoming 14-day Fast of David in December 2021, people at the Rainbow Theatre were told that

Satan has found a way to distract us (notably through the internet); the Fast of Daniel is to “cleanse yourself”. That doesn’t mean just listening to Christian music; it means making an effort. The decision is yours.

The effects on followers of being told insistently that their lives are threatened by evil forces are no doubt variable. But the purpose of these messages and the pressure to reciprocate, must be to instil a sense of supernatural threat from demonic sources, and a concomitant hope that by strengthening the relations of reciprocity with the church that danger can be thwarted.

Yearning for the Holy Spirit and fear of diabolic threats to the peace of one’s life and family are not enough to create enduring bonds between a church and its followers. Like the prying researcher, it is difficult for pastors to gain an insight into listeners’ intimate responses to their apocalyptic warnings. So precisely because there is no reliable way of knowing whether people who attend services “really” receive the Holy Spirit or whether they lead a life of unblemished virtue, they focus their energies on offering those who walk through the door a relationship of reciprocity in the hope that they become regular contributors (*dizimistas* who pay their tithes or *dízimos*, or *firmes* – “regulars”) and that their commitment of time evolves from occasional to regular attendance and active involvement. In this the Universal Church seems to have broken many conventions, at least in the eyes of commentators from beyond the Pentecostal public. Unlike other churches, where donations and collections are dealt with discretely, they never made a pretense of discretion - indeed their leaders seem to have made a point from very early on of making a spectacle of the *dízimo* – that is, of calling for contributions loudly and insistently, sometimes in open-air gatherings in football stadiums. This provoked shock among the educated middle classes and the mainstream media in Brazil, including the country’s dominant network, TV Globo, but the UCKG thrives on defying the conventions of religious respectability, and in Brazil the spectacle has been imitated by other churches such as Valdemiro Santiago’s now almost bankrupt Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus and RR Soares’

Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus¹⁷ – both founded by former close associates, and in the latter case a close relative, of Edir Macedo.

The call for donations is a ritual in every service, however small the congregation: assistants line up in formation in front of the podium holding red velvet bags open to receive cash and electronic terminals for card donations. Only once, at a small venue in Amsterdam, have I noticed that the pastor did not make the call, leaving a bag near the front for spontaneous contributions (though I do not know this if this was his standard practice).¹⁸

However insistent the calls for contributions, the double bind is also present: pastors sow the seed of self-doubt in listeners' minds, telling them that giving is only of value if done with 100% sincerity. And yet be in no doubt: the *dízimo* is the “most sacred” 10% of your income, coming before household expenses, school fees and tax. It is not clear whether or how this 10% is monitored. Assistants politely ask people who come to the church for their names and contact numbers, but I myself have not been asked to declare my income. In the Universal Church in London we are invited to place our contribution in an envelope including a form which enables the church, as a recognized charity, to claim back the tax we pay on the corresponding income (“Gift Aid” in Britain). This increases the value of taxpayers' donations to registered charities by 25%. Most adults seem to go to the front and contribute.

Pastors often take care to link the call for donations to the themes of their preaching, however tenuously. For example, in a service based on a passage from the Book of Job the pastor said “because Job feared God he averted doing something bad” and continued, in a swift change of subject: “Our tithe is a symbol of our fear of God”. And then, again exemplifying the double bind, and warning against expectations of reciprocity from God, he also said that “giving a tithe in the expectation of God's blessing is like marrying someone for their money”.¹⁹

And yet they are fond of quoting a passage from the Book of the prophet Malachi 3:10:

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 it.

Ilana van Wyk refers to the same passage quoted frequently in Durban many years earlier (Van Wyk 2014:219). In her experience

¹⁷ Worldwide Church of the Power of God, and International Church of God's Grace.

¹⁸ Visit in May 2023.

¹⁹ Rainbow Theatre, 21 November 2021.

UCKG pastors ... treated tithes and sacrifices as binding contracts with God that were not only powerful but predictable in their results. Such assertions were based on an understanding of God that was fundamentally transactional. As pastors made clear, the relationship between God and man has always been one of giving and receiving (Van Wyk 2014:200).

That was in the first decade of the century; by the second decade, at least in Europe and the Americas, pastors were undermining this mirage of exchange with the double bind: if you give with the expectation of receiving it is not valid. And then, developing the theme of sincerity, they add a further twist: you cannot know about your own sincerity until you receive the benefits in exchange – or not.

Disruptive ritual

Pastors and bishops of the Universal Church throughout the world follow a standardized style of preaching: their voices rise and fall in pitch and volume as if hectoring their listeners with a hammering diction. Their oratory is so standard that one might regard it as ritual in itself. Pentecostal preaching in general is known for its high volume and even its morally punitive quality, but the Universal Church style is distinctive in its own way, more demanding of respect than affection – offset by occasional moments of familiarity and humour. Outside the services, though, pastors and *obreiros* are highly approachable, apparently ready to give as much time as their congregants ask.

Symbolic procedures like the distribution of a tiny plastic chalice or a *lenço* to take home and then return, or the rose that we bring and then take home and bring back again, are constantly changing. Followers are introduced to new procedures and new dimensions to the presence of the supernatural in their lives. Even songs (hymns) are not repeated from one service to another, so their words are projected on a screen or cued in by the preacher. Perhaps that is why the singing lacks the customary enthusiastic and uplifting quality usually associated with evangelical gatherings – though I know that in some places the church does support gospel choirs. The practice of frequent change in ritual stands in contrast with Catholic and Anglican rites, or Orthodox Jewish rites, which are performed in formalized ways daily, weekly, monthly or annually as if sleepwalking, while leaving questions of meaning and substance to professional theologians in specialized institutions removed from the everyday life of the institution. Edir Macedo has been quoted as saying that theology is an invention of the devil designed to sow confusion in the minds of the faithful and his pastors often refer disparagingly to the tedious and formalistic routines of services in other churches. In the words of one bishop, “the devil uses religion to lead us astray and to believe that we can be saved or receive the Holy Spirit by performing all sorts of

ritual like the 613 commandments or lighting candles or reciting the rosary". When I mentioned that I had spent a week in a monastery and how much I appreciated the rituals, the chanting of the monks and the atmosphere, the reply was sharp: "there is all sorts of filth behind those appearances" (Tel Aviv 17 February 2022).²⁰

In "ritualized church ritual" the "true" or original meaning of gestures and wording are lost. As Maurice Bloch has remarked, practitioners, for example shamans, react with incredulity when asked what such and such a procedure "means" (Bloch 2004). They don't really know what the question itself might mean'. In contrast, Universal Church pastors do explain their symbolism to the faithful. This concretization, peeling away the aura of mystery from the symbolism, sets the church apart from what its pastors sometimes contemptuously call "religion", with its apparatus of people drenched in learning but untouched by the Holy Spirit.

That "religion" is despised because it draws followers into irrationality and sentimentalism and away from "intelligent faith". As Alana Souza writes: "The main characteristic of intelligent faith advocated by the Universal Church is that it would not be based on feelings or emotions. Faith should be based on the Bible and its teachings and beliefs. which should not be felt". Set besides the sometimes frenetic, collective imploring of the Holy Spirit, the message is surprisingly austere. Through the IURD's different media outlets it is possible to find intelligent faith defined as obedience to God's commands without "sentimentalism", and following what is "promised by the word".²¹ Alana Souza quotes Edir Macedo's curt response when asked whether he "felt" the Holy Spirit: "I'm not feeling anything. I don't feel the presence of God. I am sure of God's presence because I believe" (Souza 2021:300-301).

It seems that by "emotion" they mean firstly the *prescribed ritual performance* as observed in hegemonic, or mainstream, religious traditions, and by intelligence and rationality they refer to scripture untouched by erudite or theological elaboration, as well as to individuals' own self-examination. Secondly, pastors denounce "religion" for misleading people emotionally by exploiting their feelings, and they deny that the UCKG preaches religion – indeed, consistent with the church's critique, the word "religion" is not used by pastors to describe what they teach. When asked what they study in their preparation to *servir no altar*, invariably they say they study nothing but Holy Writ. They do not even say they study the works of Edir Macedo. What they mean by this remains a mystery: I have not been told of a method, and I have not seen a biblical study manual. The church has recently produced a skilfully designed app²² which contains the biblical text written and spoken and Macedo's book of daily readings, *Our Bread for 365 Days* (Macedo 2018). The book provides a reading of

20 Jewish tradition speaks of 613 Commandments contained in the Pentateuch and lighting candles on Shabbat eve is a weekly ritual in even moderately observant households.

21 BISPO MACEDO. (2020), "Fé sem sentimentos". *Folha Universal*, 8 December 2020. Available at: <http://www.universal.org/bispo-macedo/post/fe-sem-sentimentos/>. Accessed 15/01/2024.

22 *Bíblia Fiel Comentada*. Available at: <https://www.bibliafielcomentada.com/#biblia-fiel>. Accessed 15 January 2024.

250 words for each day of the year, headed by a biblical quotation and accompanied by a moral exhortation at the foot of the page. It is designed for personal use by the faithful, though it may be used for study in the church or its groups.

When the pastors and the church leaders criticize “religion” for appealing to the emotions, they mean that it relies on routine repetition of empty formulae – in other words ritual. Yet, despite the denunciation of “emotion” and “religion” attendance at services at the Universal Church does seem to affect people emotionally, as evidenced in the expressions of collective despair or desperation when congregants appeal for the Holy Spirit to descend upon them. One of the purposes of pastoral rhetoric seems to be to bring about a sense of anxiety and even to destabilize its followers. In contrast to the more routinized conduct of ritual in Catholic, and “mainstream” or “historic” Protestant churches.

One characteristic of ritual in those churches is iteration: they proceed with respectful deliberation through prescribed words and motions, emphasizing their regularity through phases of the liturgy and of the day, week and seasons of the year. In the IURD, in contrast, ritual avoids that sort of reverential iteration. One might say they avoid “ritualizing ritual”, since they do not prescribe its performance in fixed moments in time and fixed places. Unsatisfied with routinized and formalized performance, they provoke listeners to question whether their actions truly reflect their inner feelings, whether they are being sincere and honest with themselves. At donation time, they tell them not to give if they are doing so just out of a sense of obligation. They taunt their listeners on the subject of their sincerity. If prayer is over-ritualized, it loses sincerity and reflectiveness

I describe these ritual patterns as disruptive in a manner akin to Joel Robbins’ use of the word “interruption” (Robbins 2020). They stand in contrast to the repetitive ritual life which lulls people into the “comfort zone” of regularity: it is regularity which encourages worshippers to think that by “going through the motions” they have fulfilled “their side of the bargain” or their obligations to God.

The disruptive character of this church’s ritual performance also departs from the concepts of ritual in writings such as those of Maurice Bloch and Dan Sperber (Bloch 2004; Sperber 1975; Sperber 1996) for whom ritual is defined by its formal character, by the repetition of procedures and their opacity. In the Universal Church however, preachers can tear apart the veil of opacity formed by ritualized and mysterious words, movements and gestures and confront the substance, appealing to native or intuitive moral codes and corresponding feelings of guilt. The one exception is the Lord’s Supper described earlier.

Another example is the “Novena of Spiritual Cleansing”²³ which, as announced in London in May 2022, stretches over 9 Fridays. Members are given a booklet and each Friday over 9 weeks (hence the name “Novena”) they bring a page from the

23 Novena is a Catholic term referring to a nine-day prayer cycle. In the UCKG they use it to refer to a nine-week cycle.

booklet on which they have written their “purpose”, or resolution. The booklet is prefaced with a brief text that speaks of the sin-ridden biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, located near the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea provides the salt for the “Valley of Salt” - a white sheet laid on the floor in front of the altar. Each Friday during those nine weeks congregants walk through a temporary white arch and then proceed along the sheet illuminated on either side by decoration light bulbs and flanked by *obreiros*. Most people hand in their resolution to one of the assistants or drop it on the white sheet. There is a page for each week with a theme, starting with Physical Cleansing and followed by Mind, Emotional, Financial, Family, Professional, Love Life, Social, and Spiritual. After nine weeks, other exercises will take place.

Healing: managing ambiguity

In contemporary societies, there seems to be a trade-off between the formality of ritual and its literal interpretation. A mainstream Anglican or Catholic or an Orthodox Jew perform numerous rituals, some of which are prayers for something to happen; these are really expressions of a hope or a wish, for example for recovery from illness or for passing an exam. They follow a prescribed formula; in church or synagogue they are an expression of support from the gathering for the individuals concerned. They are not usually expected to have a practical effect but they nurture the formulaic possibility that divine intervention might occur. In Pentecostal churches, and in the neo-Pentecostal IURD, healing rituals which do not draw on ancient formulae or procedures, are conducted more noisily, frequently and confidently, but the underlying logic is the same: if it works, we should give thanks to God (not to the pastor or priest) and if it does not, then we may conclude that God did not want it to be so. As with the double bind, so the promise of cure cannot be faulted.

For example, assistants move around the congregation, holding people’s heads down while uttering a brief prayer that they may be freed of all evil things and illnesses, and then releasing the demons in a sudden gesture, crying “Out! Out!”. More elaborate exorcism is also sometimes conducted during Friday services on one or two individuals – usually women - who come forward or are called forward to the front of the church. Those individuals are held down, bent over double, while the pastor summons the demons to release them, the possessed person writhes and grunts and groans and screams, until eventually the procedure stops, the individual calms down and returns to their seat.

Healing has been present from the foundation of the Universal Church: in his first autobiographical text, *Orixás, caboclos e guias: deuses o demónios?* Macedo wrote that, like Jesus himself, he should devote himself to healing the sick and expelling evil spirits (Macedo 1988). Today, perhaps more outside Brazil than in Brazil itself, the church takes care to avoid claiming that its healing activities replace professional medical treatment: the website of the Rainbow Theatre Help Centre in London

states that “the UCKG Help Centre does not claim to heal people but believes that God can heal through the power of faith”.²⁴

When people come down from the podium after this prolonged ritual terminating in a summary healing gesture from the pastor, they are often asked if the procedure had the desired effect: can we assume that by agreeing that their pain has subsided they “truly believe” they have been cured? When the pastor asks: “Do you feel better now?”, they can hardly say “no”, if only because by saying no they would be setting themselves apart from the congregation. If they volunteer to present themselves for the summary cure they must be prepared to recognize its effectiveness. But the elements in question are mostly psychological, and non-visible: there are no reports of people throwing away their crutches and shouting “Hurrah! God be praised!”.

This is not a short-term instrumental relationship: those people have not walked in off the street to get a “quick fix”. I was told by the *obreiro* in Recife – the same one who spoke of mementoes and devices as bait - that they had stopped distributing plastic bags of “water from the River Jordan” because people were taking them home and never returning: he presumed that they were indeed looking for a “quick fix” (my words). These healing moments are part of an encompassing relationship with the community of the faithful, supernatural entities, the pastor and the church. As regular attendants they are accustomed to respecting the authority of a pastor independently of practical effects.

From the church’s point of view there is always the risk of free riding, reflected in the frustration of a Brazilian pastor, Pastor Paulo, in Cancún, Mexico. Paulo complained to me that people come to church in search of a solution, for example to their financial difficulties, and then when they have solved their problem, they never return. He was the same pastor who had known the successful entrepreneur in Mexico City mentioned above and he was contrasting the free riders with the loyalty of that businessman.²⁵

A doctor is normally expected to be independent of any personal involvement in our lives. Conversely the healing offered by a pastor is inserted in a web of relationships that bind their followers to each other and to a church, among which is the anxiety-ridden relationship with the Holy Spirit. And, like that relationship, the

24 This warning originates in the shocking case of Victoria Climbié, a child tortured and murdered in 2003 by her great-aunt, who was involved tangentially in the Church, leading to a public inquiry into the performance of the local social services, and also an examination by the UK Charity Commissioners of whether the church had contributed to the child’s abuse by claiming to practice healing. The Charity Commissioners absolved the Church of those accusations but its association with the case remains in the collective memory: still today when the church is mentioned in conversation people who have little or no familiarity with it often recall the case. Available at: <https://www.uckg.org/press/exorcism-and-healing/>. Accessed 16/4/2021. Macedo sued Fernando Haddad after he had called him a ‘fundamentalista charlatão’ during the 2018 election campaign. Although Macedo’s case was initially successful, the verdict was overturned by a superior court. *G1 SP*, 6 November 2020. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2020/11/06/tj-de-sp-absolve-haddad-de-indenizar-edir-macedo-por-chamar-bispo-de-charlatao.ghtml>. Accessed 15/01/2024.

25 Cancún, 26 June 2023

healing is beset by uncertainty. Few people will know, or even claim to know, *for sure* whether the mysterious healing procedure made them recover, and if they did not recover they, or their bereaved relatives, will conclude that although something went wrong this time, on another occasion the pastor's cure might work, as in Dan Sperber's account of the *couvade*, a practice found in different forms in New Guinea, among Amazonian cultures and elsewhere (Sperber 1996:49-55).²⁶ Either way, a pastor's healing procedure does no physical harm, although there may be psychological harm. It is also cheap, at least in the short run; in the long run the church must hope that the procedure presages a long-term relationship and the tithes that come with it.

The pastor in Nazareth mentioned at the start of this paper provided another illustration of the ambiguities involved in healing stories. He told me that he and his wife have an autistic child who is now a teenager. He said the child has been on Ritalin (a medication usually prescribed for "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder" or ADHD), but has gradually evolved from an acute case to a high functioning one – he knew all about "the spectrum" (of autistic disorders). He hinted at the role of the Spirit in improving the child's condition, but did not insist on it, and added that intelligent care from the parents had a role. He did not mention medical professionals but presumably they had also been consulted.

In contrast, the aforementioned bishop who ridiculed the monastery as "so much filth", told me of the recovery of his sister-in-law who was taken to hospital in São Paulo having suffered a stroke. At the time he was outside Brazil. The surgeon had said that an operation could remove the clot but might leave her paralyzed for life. So the bishop called his brother and told him to stop the operation and start a *corrente de oração* (a prayer circle). Three days later the doctor opened up her brain and found no clot... My interlocutor did not offer an explanation as such: he just raised his eyebrows as if to say "you see?" His sister-in-law, for her part, may well never have had a clot at all: even if the outline of events was correct, like all healing stories, this was an *ex post* account. Had she died or remained sick it would not have been recounted.

In another example of managed ambiguity he told me of a man who had overcome severe psychological and addiction problems. In this case the description was in terms of willpower: a determination to free himself of psychiatrists, therapists, drugs and methadone. Taken in hand by the bishop, he had persuaded his doctor to gradually reduce methadone over a period of a month – it must have been extremely painful but it worked. The former addict now had a job as a security guard in a hospital and also worked with the bishop in the church administration. Often, when I visited the church, he was there. Consistent with pastors' frequent insistence

²⁶ *Couvade* "refers... to a set of precautions (e.g. resting, lying down, food restrictions) a man is expected to take during and just after the birth of a child of his, precautions similar to those imposed more understandably on the mother of the child" (Sperber 1996:36). Sperber makes the point that despite apparent similarities it would be mistaken to apply the same interpretation to all the cases, which occur in societies so far apart from one another.

on the importance of reason, wisdom and intelligence, they took care not to say his improvement was thanks to his prayers: he believed that he had overcome his addictions, and the demons that underlay them, by the application of reason and thanks to the support of the bishop.

In more impersonal settings pastors and *obreiros* explain the purpose of devices they hand out, reminding us that, on their own, the devices “don’t work”:

At the door of the church in Lanus, a historic working class suburb of Buenos Aires, on 7 February 2023, a Tuesday, when the theme is health issues,²⁷ an assistant offered me a swab with oil to anoint those parts of my body which were causing me pain. She said I could go to the bathroom if I liked and do it there. But at the same time she was careful to remind me that it is not the oil which cures – rather God cures.

I then entered the church where the pastor was speaking of healing. He began with “la cura del alma”. “When Jesus returns only those who have “curado el alma” will be saved – sadly the rest will not.” So before proceeding to talk of healing the body he had warned us that a true inner cleansing or healing of the soul is more important. Again – there is no guarantee and we must look to our consciences.

I have never in recent years heard pastors claiming that cancer or heart disease can be cured by spiritual methods, whereas I do recall hearing such claims in the 1990s. In Brazil other churches, like Valdemiro Santiago’s Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus, are more brazen in their claims of spiritual healing – which would be punishable under laws against *charlatanismo* and *curandeirismo* if the authorities applied them consistently.²⁸

The IURD’s main investment today is in support for people suffering from what might be called the ills of modern life – ills for which biomedical remedies are uncertain and whose remedies depend on the active involvement of the patient. Pastors recite long lists including depression, suicidal thoughts, sleeplessness, anxiety, and self-hatred. In one of his publications, Macedo lists the following principal

27 Every day of the week, in all UCKG churches worldwide, has a theme. On the website of the UK headquarters They are described as follows: Monday: Prosperity; Tuesday: Health; Wednesday: School of Faith; Thursday: Family and Love Therapy; Friday: Spiritual Cleansing (i.e. exorcism); Saturday: Impossible Cases; Sunday: Empowerment. Available at: <https://www.uckg.org/>. Accessed 28/01/2024.

28 *Curandeirismo* is loosely translated as “quackery”. The Brazilian Penal Code of 1890 prohibited the unqualified practice of medicine targeting methods rooted in popular healing, popular religion, and spiritism, even herbal medicine. It has occasionally been invoked against evangelical churches, including the UCKG, though the cases rarely reach a conclusion. According to the Globo website of 5 January 2021 a judge did instruct the SUS (the state’s Unified Health Service) twice to pronounce on the efficacy of a remedy for COVID offered by Valdemiro, but the order was not complied with: “Para o MPF, houve prática abusiva da liberdade religiosa.” Available at : <https://g1.globo.com/sp/sao-paulo/noticia/2021/01/05/justica-determina-pela-2a-vez-que-ministerio-da-saude-informe-se-feijao-do-pastor-valdemiro-santiago-cura-covid-19.ghtml>. Accessed 15/01/2024.

“symptoms of demonic possession”: constant headaches, insomnia, fear, suicidal thoughts, nervousness, addiction, pains that doctors cannot diagnose, envy and depression. (Macedo 2022:chapter 2.2.5) (Macedo 2014:58-65).

Apart from medication, the response of mainstream psychiatry to depression and anxiety, sometimes brought on or exacerbated by financial troubles and family conflicts, is often in the form of group therapy or cognitive behavioural therapy – remedies which are more uncertain than other medical specializations. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for psychiatrists themselves to recommend people suffering from addiction to attend Alcoholic Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, whose methods have a widely recognized affinity with Pentecostal conversion. Although compared with those sorts of remedies the offerings of the church may look quite interesting, they lack professional certification, and patients are not protected from abuse. Compared to psychiatry or professional psychotherapy, the IURD’s folk psychotherapy has the advantage, in the eyes of some sufferers, that it is free – at least to start with. The rationale of the church must lie in an expectation that those sufferers who engage with its pastors and assistants will be drawn by a sense of obligation to contribute with money and with their time, if only to avoid feelings of guilt that would arise from a refusal of reciprocity. Dangers arise when that reciprocity turns into a relationship of dependence or excessive subservience, such as is heard in the allegations of dissidents who leave the church and denounce it from without.²⁹

The case of the man who weaned himself off drug dependence raises the question whether the folk-therapeutic path is not also a path to close involvement with the church and its personnel, and it may not be by chance that pastors, in the UCKG and other Pentecostal churches, so often speak of their own troubled past, sometimes with lurid accounts of addiction, violence. or just frivolity. Because of their formulaic character – that is, repeated stories that follow a common pattern of drugs, alcohol, domestic violence, oppressive fathers and parental separation - I have tended to doubt the authenticity of these confessional responses to the question asking what brought them to join a church, but maybe my scepticism is not justified. That is, maybe by noisily proclaiming its welcome to them, the church really does end up with a disproportionate representation of former addicts among its pastors.³⁰

29 See the Instagram account #leavinguniversal operated by a group of young people who left the UK church in deep disillusion. I do not find their stories unconvincing not least because unlike dissident pastors they do not have an interest in ‘making a career’ out of their dissidence. For a dissident pastor see the somewhat sensationalist Instagram account of Davi Vieira (@falecomdavi.vieira) and an interview with him on YouTube available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDytTgBNSWo>. Accessed on 28/01/2024. Vieira continues to operate as an independent pastor.

30 It has been suggested that Pentecostal churches welcome former addicts because they can make use of the same skills that drive drug dealing – hustling, the ‘gift of the gab’ - and because they may become dependent on their lives in the church (Hansen 2018).

Sincerity and the forces of evil

Without the Holy Spirit you are misled (“você está enganada”) (Finsbury Park 9 December 2020, Portuguese service). During the two-week Fast of Daniel just fasting is “not the point”: an assistant explains to a Prayer Group that fasting means giving up frivolous pursuits for two weeks, but that is still only superficial appearance. One also should focus on the moral improvement of one’s life. Even calls for donations are sometimes accompanied by the proviso that they should not be motivated by a sense of obligation: pastors both insistently call for regular tithing and donations, and admonish their listeners not to donate to the church unless they do so with the purest intentions. One should give with one’s heart, with true sincerity, and if that sentiment is absent then one should abstain and not donate merely out of a sense of duty (Finsbury Park 20 November 2021). Once again, the listener is left wondering how to be sure of her own sincerity, just as she is not sure of possessing the Holy Spirit.

This again returns us to the double bind. Preachers can be paraphrased thus:

More than having faith we have to practice faith: you may do all the right things – you may pray, you may kneel down before God, but that is not the point: you have to sacrifice. And even then if you do not see the results you are not *really* sacrificing. Jesus said: “Give and it will be given unto you” (Luke 6:38), but it has to be 100%. Even if you give 99 per cent you still will receive zero.

That is the twist: the test of the sincerity of your prayers and of the extent of your sacrifice lies in whether they have been answered.³¹ You are not supposed to pray in expectation of a reward or return, yet the test of the sincerity is in that very return. The “logic” is the same as that I heard from the pastor in Cancún who complained of the free riders who did not return once they had achieved their purpose.

We can think of this pattern of looking behind appearances, of discarding formalities and programmed gestures and performances in the search for underlying sentiments as habits of speech: the description of a ritual performance triggers a question about its authenticity; a donation invites a questioning of the donor’s motivation; and a declaration of love can conceal all manner of perfidy. Pastors sow distrust in the minds of their congregants. They tell them that despite an appearance of peace and love, their marriage may be threatened by evil spirits, especially by marital infidelity, or that a caring neighbour who seems so kind to their children is in fact grooming them for something sinister.

Bishop Zagarinho, speaking at the João Diaz cathedral in São Paulo in February 2023 enumerated the same symptoms of demonic possession as Macedo in his book

31 Finsbury Park, December 2020

just quoted, saying “depression is the curse of this century” but then offers words of consolation:

... but God promises to convert curses into blessings

Confronting the cultos and their spirits

One salient difference between the services I have personally observed in Brazil and elsewhere (Mexico, USA, Israel and England) is that the entities derived from spiritism and Africa-derived possession cults make no overt appearance in those other countries, even in the services in Portuguese. This surprises me because in London a significant proportion of the overwhelmingly black congregation are themselves from West Africa (including Congo and Angola) or are the children of West African immigrants, and we know that West African cultures are suffused with fear of harmful invisible or occult entities. We also know that millions of West Africans belong to Pentecostal churches whose members are acutely aware of the presence of invisible forces in their own lives and those of their kinship networks (Geschiere 1995; Meyer 1995; Meyer 1998a; Meyer 1998b; Meyer 1999).

However, in South Africa and Mozambique, the UCKG has developed a strategy to divert its followers from indigenous supernatural beliefs. As in Brazil, this strategy involves a degree of ambivalence and even intertwining with the church's own concept of evil and the forces that bring it into our lives.

In Brazil, the Universal Church's depiction of a threatening world and of the threats to an individual by diabolical forces that can possess them and gain control of their will, draws to a significant extent on Brazilian *cultos* especially *candomblé*, as described already in 1996, again by Patricia Birman, who refers to that ambivalence as a “more complex movement”:

A forma básica de mediação estabelecida por esse pentecostalismo com os cultos de possessão é aquela fornecida pela atividade de exorcismo e por vários ritos complementares de purificação e limpeza corporal. Através desses ritos se estabelece uma relação de combate a tais cultos, vistos como adversários, e com os seres sobrenaturais que são provenientes dessa mesma fonte, os espíritos e orixás, identificados como seres diabólicos. Esse combate, contudo, não deve nos enganar: não se trata de uma negação pura e simples dos entes e ritos de um outro sistema, mas sim de um movimento mais complexo que envolve mecanismos de natureza ritual sobretudo (Birman 1996a:94).

Pastors sometimes detect a person's protective spirits and use the names of the spirits, inverting the *candomblé* procedure by turning against the spirits and denouncing

them as treacherous forces that lead those they inhabit to misery and perdition, to suicidal thoughts and poisonous relationships. Like the adepts of the cults, pastors of the Universal Church represent the world as a competitive place infused with jealousy where individuals need the support of higher powers to counter the spells cast upon them by their enemies or rivals. While in the cults supernatural entities are summoned to inhabit the bodies of the mediums, the preachers of the Universal Church demand vociferously that they manifest themselves so as to expel them (Boyer 1996:258).

Likewise, Ilana van Wyk's ethnography of the Universal Church in Durban (South Africa), conducted between 2005 and 2010, depicts the pastors "plugging in" to a belief system (quite different from the Brazilian cults) in which curses and witchcraft are a constant source of fear and distrust and affect kinship relationships in perverse ways. The pastors in her study portray the "clean: money followers can expect to "receive back" if they donate large quantities to the church, in contrast to the polluted money that can come from other sources, including family members. As in Brazil, they worked the church's ideas about demonic influences on people's lives into the framework of indigenous Zulu ideas about fortune and misfortune, the dangers of polluting substances penetrating the body and the witchcraft perpetrated by diviners and family members (Van Wyk 2014:130). The local context offered fertile ground for the atmosphere of distrust engendered by the pastoral rhetoric.

In Brazil the church's relationship to the cults is more ambivalent. Its preachers denounce their entities for the harm they do to those they inhabit, yet they prize the skills and expertise of former mediums who become members, so the relationship between the cults and the church cannot be described as one of rupture or incompatibility. For example, Birman describes a case where an individual continues to invoke, summon or cajole spirits to descend upon her even while she regularly frequents the Universal Church. A medium from umbanda or candomblé who joins the church (I hesitate to call them converts) derives prestige and status from their past, and may be spared exorcism at the hands (literally) of a pastor.

When a preacher tells me of their history of deep past involvement in the cults, it sounds as if they are highlighting the depth of the transformation they have experienced: as an ethnographer, I hear (or want to hear) that they have left all that behind them. But maybe I am wrong or naive. That is to say, maybe their underlying message is that they retain their faculties as a medium, and are still communing with, or inhabited by, their governing entities, as Birman implies? Maybe the message is darker than I initially assumed. The same reasoning could apply to the pastors who boast of their past as drug traffickers: in the light of a literature that has documented the murky overlap sometimes existing between the traffic and evangelical churches in Brazil and Central America, one may wonder if the rupture has been as definitive as they say (Brenneman 2012; O'Neill 2019; Vital da Cunha 2015).

In Birman's interpretation, exorcism does not end the possession: both in the cults and in the church constant efforts are required to "tie down" the devils for

long after, maybe forever. Edlaine Gomes disagrees, writing that once people have been through certain stages of induction and been baptized by full immersion, they are deemed able to resist demonic forces, and are qualified to ascend through the church's hierarchy (Gomes 2011:90). Either way, in the years since those authors did their research the church may have changed its handling of the "African" spirits. My impression is that they pay more attention now to everyday psychological and moral problems which pastors attribute to generic forces of evil rather than named entities from that pantheon.

So wherever they go in Africa the pastors confront the spirits and summon them by their names. Or they give them names drawn from *candomblé*. Thus in Mozambique where the Universal Church has "hundreds" of establishments, pastors rescue women from spirits they believe to condemn them to a life marriage prospects, by mimicking and mocking local *curandeiros*, and violating deeply rooted local taboos. In one case Linda van de Kamp describes a pastor, in defiance of local disapproval of public demonstrations of desire, making an exhibition of affection with his wife in church in order to "demonstrate the shortcomings of local customs" (Van de Kamp 2016:65-67). "The pastors are bringing their notion of Africa back to Africa in order to exorcise African culture's evil spirits" – for they say that Africa is riddled with the evil spirits which lie at the origin of the spirits that ruin the lives of Brazilians too. (Of course for the practitioners of cults themselves their African origins are a blessing, not a curse (Capone 1999)). The ambiguity of their handling of the cults in Brazil disappears in Mozambique where all the intricacies of lives haunted by ancestral spirits are merged into a single war of direct confrontation (Van de Kamp 2016:110 ff.). The confrontational approach may sound simplistic, but there is no doubting its impact on local populations, and its demoralizing effect on the cults, which would echo the effects of Pentecostalism in Brazil itself, in Guatemala, in Ghana, in Nigeria and in South Africa (Garrard 2021; Meyer 1998a; Vital da Cunha 2015). The "war" of neo-Pentecostalism against the cults in Brazil, which occasionally borders on violence is well illustrated by the documentary *Fé e Fúria* by Marcos Pimentel, with anthropologist Christina Vital da Cunha as adviser (Embaúba Films 2022) – though the Universal Church does not figure. In Mozambique the effect seems to go beyond the supernatural imaginary. The influence of pastors on women who attend their churches leads them to confront the world alone, supported by their own fasting, prayer, and tithing. They acquire agency, for example as entrepreneurs, and act on their environments from "individualized" positions, covering their bodies in "spiritual armour" as they incorporate the conflicts in their society (Van de Kamp 2016:127-130).

Debates on the subject among African Pentecostals are marked by "white man's guilt", in disagreement with black preachers' hostility to "African" spirits. This echoes differences between Brazilian intellectuals and their campaigns against the religious intolerance of Pentecostal preachers and their "spiritual warfare". Transposed to Africa, this tension makes the Universal Church appear almost "colonial". Thus

Allan Anderson, a theologian and prominent scholar of African Pentecostalism, being a descendant of four generations of white missionaries, in his understandable anxiety to shake off the burden of that inheritance, rejects European Pentecostal missionaries' binary categorizations: after describing numerous incidents of possession in which people "behave strangely", sometimes jumping up and down and screaming, only calming down after sessions of deliverance lasting several hours, he rejects the idea that African spirits are unqualified agents of harm. Like the African pastors he quotes, Anderson calls for "both a dialogue and a confrontation between the new, 'powerful' Christian faith and the old beliefs in spirit and ancestors" (Anderson 2006). The UCKG has no such inhibitions or anxieties.

In London where a high proportion of followers are of West African origin, possession cults and their spirits are not mentioned, but in Mozambique Brazilian pastors will have none of such a conciliatory approach: in the fight against the demons of Africa they have an advantage, for they are not Europeans. When a pastor is relocated from, say, South Africa to Chile, he presumably has to change his approach. This appears to be a remarkable organizational or managerial achievement: the forces of evil that are to be resisted in the Universal Church's ideology are now to be combated not only by performances of exorcism, but also by a familiar, less exotic, Protestant call to self-control and a purposive life.

Conclusion

The Universal Church invites its followers to pursue a state of perfection united with the Holy Spirit, that is, with God. Yet, the pastors who proclaim "receiving the Spirit" as the summit of aspiration tell them that they will never be absolutely sure they have achieved that condition. Even once achieved, they will not be secure against the diabolic forces that threaten to destroy them, their families, and their property.

Calvin traced a similar trap. In Charles Taylor's words, similar to Max Weber before him,

Puritan spiritual life moved between a Scylla and Charybdis. On one hand one had to have confidence in one's salvation. Too much anxious doubt amounted to a turning away of God's gift, and could even be a sign that one was not saved at all. But at the same time an utterly unruffled confidence showed that ... one was the sinner, who richly deserved eternal damnation, and was only saved from this by God's gratuitous Grace... (Taylor 2007:83)

In the Universal Church the burden of anxiety is slightly different because the pastors point the finger at our own consciences: when we pray, when we give, are we truly sincere? are our donations truly disinterested? When we are baptised in the waters, will we truly deserve to receive the Holy Spirit?

Gestures and actions undertaken with good intentions may well be fake; the sincerity of my own prayer is subject to constant doubt; my donations to the church may be unworthy or pointless if I am tempted to expect a return. Yet the pastors themselves are not immune to encouraging us to expect a return – and sometimes tell us that if prayer fails we have to accept that it must not have been fully sincere.

According to Taylor Calvinists in effect have it both ways too: those whom he calls “successful well-behaved people in our well-ordered society/stratum” (what others might call the “chosen few”) are confident that the universe is unfolding as it should and their declarations that they are “helpless sinners” are (like so much prayer) routine formulaic utterances.

In the UCKG there is no ritual to allay our doubts. Instead there are rituals to overcome emotional problems, to ward off the forces of evil, or to help us overcome illness. The signs of demonic possession – which those rituals can hopefully dispel if properly carried out – are at least nine; the most common in Edir Macedo’s book *Are we all God’s Children?* being what I earlier referred to as the ills of modern life: depression, suicidal thoughts, persistent headaches, addiction, undiagnosed pain and so on.

When the pastors speak of the forces of evil, they refer to the harm they can bring upon us in this life. When they speak of the “100% sincerity” without which prayer is of no use, they are no doubt alluding in a vague way to salvation, but is in their approach to problems we face in our present lives, in our marriages, in our financial life, or in our mental health, that they are more specific about the ways in which our appeals to the supernatural can help. Nonetheless, they are cautious: when they speak of the positive intervention of the supernatural they take care to add their standard phrase: “God helps you, but you have to do your bit”.

Everyone can offer themselves for baptism freely: there is no gateway. In the Catholic Church where there are gatekeepers and conditions for baptism, whereas in the Universal Church and Pentecostal churches in general it can take place in a river, a swimming pool or other venue. The relevant difference in this discussion about followers’ anxiety is not in ceremonials, but in the responsibility which lies with the person being baptised: there is no guarantee that the procedure will “work” because all depends on their inner life. The person is on their own: they may be consoled but they will not find salvation through the procedure alone.

Contrast the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippour), when the forgiveness that follows on a day-long sequence of confession and repentance, marked by the recitation of the ritual of the scapegoat is sealed at sunset. The ritual settles the matter between men and women and God: “on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord” (Leviticus 16:30). and thereafter men and women continue with their lives until the next Day of Atonement. In Catholic churches once an infant is baptised by an authorised priest in an authorised place and manner, they are cleansed of sin – that is, of original

sin. It is a “gift of God” and does not have to be earned. Of course that does not mean baptised people do not sin or that they are not to be held to account for their sins. This type of age-old ritual was dubbed empty of meaning and a cover for “filth” by the bishop quoted earlier.

In parallel the church has instituted innumerable procedures that establish a relationship of reciprocity, both symbolic and material. with the faithful. Pastors invite us to collaborate with them to achieve good things in our daily lives and to ward off the supernatural forces that bring us harm: a rose taken home from church to protect against rivals in love; a bar of soap to wipe away unclean things in the shower; our hopes and fears written on a piece of paper handed in for burning. These procedures create a bond between the church and the followers and to them are added methods of fund-raising that defy the discreet practices of other churches. Those methods are different first because they are the subject of vociferous, even aggressive, preaching, and because people are told they do not *have* to give, and they should not give out of guilt or in expectation of some sort of return (spiritual or material), even while they are also told the opposite, namely that the more they give the greater the chance of material reward, and of course, in a further twist, that there is no guarantee that God will reward them.

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Abstract:

Anxiety and Reciprocity: the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God across frontiers

The message of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), a centralized transnational organization, is gloomy and not at all optimistic, with limited, though real, influence from prosperity theology. It emphasizes diabolical forces and encourages followers to be suspicious of others and even their own motivations when praying, supplicating, and giving. In ritual performances, pastors warn followers not to expect anything in return. Rituals are described as “disruptive.” The text compares the Church’s treatment of possession cults in Brazil, Mozambique and South Africa. Healing and exorcism are considered in the context of relationships of reciprocity, with examples of “popular psychotherapy” observed on television in Brazil. The research was carried out in several countries.

Keywords: Neo-Pentecostalism; global Pentecostalism; evangelical ritual; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God; exorcism.

