

Religion and the media in a battle for ideological hegemony: the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and *TV Globo* in Brazil.

by

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In recent years the rise of a relatively new brand of Pentecostalism has made religion a battlefield of political and cultural dispute in Brazil. This neo-Pentecostalism, as it is often described, is observed worldwide, but its effects in Brazil are of particular interest because this is a country otherwise noted for religious tolerance, for a history of multiple and multi-levelled symbolic and political exchanges between different religious traditions, Catholic, 'African' and indigenous, even though the Catholic Church has enjoyed a tacit but widely recognized cultural and political predominance. As elsewhere in Latin America, this predominance goes together with an open and non-exclusive approach to the adherence asked of its followers, and to multiple interactions between what the Church officially expects and what the 'popular' face of Catholicism provides. For their part, the possession cults - commonly though slightly misleadingly known as 'Afro-Brazilian cults' - are for many currents of opinion a defining feature of national identity (Fry, 1983, 1984), while indigenous religious forms have influenced both the possession cults and popular Catholicism.¹

The increasing tension has manifested itself in different parts of the religious sphere. Within the Catholic Church a 'People's Church' tendency has promoted grass-roots activism among clergy and lay people working to promote social movements in support of the democratization of society and - more seriously, in the eyes of the Pope - of the Church itself. On the other hand, tendencies such as the Charismatic Renewal and other devotional movements have also developed rapidly with support from the Vatican but some hostility from the People's Church. Within the Protestant sphere, Pentecostalism - after 80 years of steady growth 'from below' - has come to be recognized as a significant presence in society, while neo-Pentecostal Churches, notably the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, have grown vertiginously in both numbers and visibility, grabbing the limelight, provoking scandals in politics, the media and public life generally, and breaking - though not destroying - the tolerant religious pluralism which has hitherto prevailed. These may have elements of 'New Age' which connect them to a growing middle class attraction to astrology, numerology and tarot cards, and they are without doubt also influenced by the 'Theology of Prosperity and Health' or 'Gospel of Health and Wealth', but it is the charismatic trend which interests us, and within that the Universal Church.

In previous work we have pointed out, on the basis of field work in Brazil, the ways in which Pentecostalism subverts both ways of life and widespread concepts of possession and of the person (Lehmann, 1996; Birman, 1997). Here we extend this idea into the realm of culture, or better of the politics of culture and cultural hegemony. We shall show how symbolic and rhetorical twists in the Universal Church's version of Pentecostalism have given a sharp edge to this religious dissidence - an edge which touches the raw nerves of power. We shall see how the polemics which the Universal Church has provoked and in which it has participated, draw on historically rooted legal and metaphorical usages which contribute to and reflect a sense of threat on the part of the country's elite. It is not necessarily a big threat, it does not herald the imminent collapse of the 'system', but if interpreted at the broadest level, it shows how in a society undergoing profound change in every area of economic and social life, the symbolic system, and the conventions of public debate and rhetoric, also undergo significant change.

The analysis presented below takes its point of departure from a series of incidents in the media during 1995. It shows that (even) in Brazil toleration has limits and indeed goes on to show the double-edged quality of that toleration. The culturally and symbolically confrontational character of rapidly growing

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¹ See Brown, (1986), for the case of *umbanda*, and Rabelo, (1993), for the intertwining of indigenous and Catholic representations in a peasant area of the North-East.

neo-Pentecostalism vis-à-vis Catholicism and especially the possession cults (against which the battle sometimes goes beyond the symbolic and the cultural), has provoked hostile responses both from the institutions and associations directly affected, and from many other sources - the press, the giant Globo communications company, the legal profession, and an intelligentsia whose political loyalties are usually assumed to be on the left. This paper offers an interpretation of those polemics in a historical perspective and in the light of the ways in which the popular is constructed in Brazil.

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In Brazil, and in their different ways in all Latin American countries, the religious field has for centuries been shaped and reshaped by relationships among different identities, and this shaping and reshaping itself has, of course, taken place in a complex, and often surprising relationship with economic, social and political domination. These are cultures where several different religious traditions and institutions already claim legitimacy in terms of their identification with the inherited traditions of the 'people'², that is with a historically and in a sense genealogically rooted identitarian construction. The Catholic mainstream, for all its time-honoured paraphernalia of rituals and performance, has a built-in presence of 'the people', or 'the popular', and thus of symbolic representations and ritual practices such as Saints Days and ritual processions which claim origins in popular culture and found their legitimacy in that claim. Other mainstreams - of which possession cults in their various forms are the most prominent - devote much rhetorical and symbolic effort to showing their origins in an ethnically distinct past (Dantas, 1988). The arrival of a highly successful newcomer with a massive following among the poor who simultaneously rejects that 'rootedness' as a source of legitimacy, is bound to disconcert.³

Founded in 1975 by Edir Macedo, the Universal Church became noticed for its rapid growth in the late 1980s. Throughout the 1990s it has spread across Brazil through town and countryside, renting hangar-like premises, buying up disused cinemas, and constructing brand new church buildings. Like the Assemblies of God, and other Pentecostal Churches, it is becoming an institution in the impoverished *periferia* of the country's major conurbations, but the ambitions of this Church, popularly known for short as '*a Universal*', are more 'mediatic' and more political - in all senses of the word. It has expanded to Uruguay and Argentina, and overseas, to Portugal, South Africa and Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, to New York, Miami, London and Paris. It is also transcending its image of a church for the poor and gradually penetrating into the middle classes.

The Universal Church's propensity to operate unfamiliar and even iconoclastic permutations between the images, doctrines and architectural styles available to it in Brazil's religious 'field' operates without any 'prejudice'. Thus although its origins lie in one, or several, Pentecostal churches, and although it describes itself as Pentecostal, it has not joined the Brazilian Evangelical Association (which represents the Assemblies of God and others in their image) and because of its many unique or eccentric practices, should possibly be thought of as equidistant from all Christian religious traditions active in Brazil.

Compared with 'traditional' Pentecostalism, which is a culture of small chapels, neo-Pentecostal churches have a much more centralized organization superficially comparable in its pyramidal structure to that of the Catholic Church - though also to the 'democratic centralism of old-style Communist Parties (Lehmann 1996:123). One can detect imitation of - and competition with - the Catholic Church in its propensity for monumental buildings in central locations, as opposed to the traditional Pentecostal preference for small chapels in peripheral areas, reflecting an ambition to become not just a church but a prominent social institution. Rather like the Catholic Church the Universal Church treats its followers less like a community and more like clients, encouraging people to 'drop in', to contribute funds, and to join in proselytizing nuclei, but placing less emphasis on community activities than the Assemblies, with their choirs, bands, and educational activities. Neo-Pentecostal churches adopt modern methods of organization and marketing, to the point where the

² One of the most stimulating and sensitive discussions is Gruzinski, (1989).

³ See the discussions in Lehmann (1996) which outlines a general approach to the definition of popular culture in the context of Brazilian religion.

Universal Church is reported to use a franchise system in its Portuguese operations. The 'Gospel of Health and Wealth' (Gifford, 1993) promises riches on earth for those who would 'accept Jesus', and the prospect of personal enrichment is associated in their rhetoric with the practice of giving to the Church. The dictum of St. Francis - 'only by giving shall you receive', is frequently repeated albeit with a fundamentally, almost unrecognisably, different interpretative slant from that given by the Saint⁴. In accordance with this proclamation of faith, conversion and church membership as ways to solve problem of 'this world' and achieving life's ambitions, they also advertise healing and miracles as a matter of routine.

The Universal Church stands out even among neo-Pentecostal churches for its departure from the discretion which marks the history of Pentecostalism in Brazil and Latin America generally. Pentecostal churches and federations of churches, most notably the Assemblies of God, have kept a low socio-political profile, have maintained the utmost respect for the political establishment, and have encouraged conformity to the respectable values of thrift, hard work, and respect for social superiors. Macedo challenges and scandalizes the intellectual and cultural establishment with his ability to persuade millions of worshippers, despite their low incomes, to donate apparently substantial amounts of money in response to insistent requests by the Church's preachers. In addition to this violation of prevailing standards of good taste, the Universal Church has struck a particularly discordant note in its unrelenting war against the possession cults which, as mentioned above, constitute a time-honoured element in the construction of Brazilian national identity by the country's intelligentsia. For the Church and its preachers, these cults are the work of the devil and deliverance from possession by the devil is a central plank of its appeal. On the other hand, the Church itself borrows from the cults' language and symbolic apparatus, so that the 'war' is not as straightforward a matter as would appear - an ambiguity to which we shall return.

All this amounts to more than innovation: the Universal Church is breaking, or changing, the 'rules of the game' - not only in the religious field, where its techniques have been variously described by the Catholic Church, the liberal intelligentsia and the quality press as unfair competition, indecorous behaviour, or just plain charlatanism, but also in the media market. As the account given below will show, by 1995 even the media moguls of TV Globo, the foremost producers of Brazil's self-image in the domain of mass culture, understood the radical challenge that the Church's methods represented for that self-image and for the reality behind it.

By breaking into the world of media and politics the Universal Church most publicly departed from the traditional discretion of Pentecostalism, coming to the notice of a vast audience beyond its religious following. Following its purchase in 1990 of the Rede Record TV Network in São Paulo for US\$47 million (*Jornal do Brasil*, 19/10/95) the Universal Church has built up a TV network as well as a network of radio stations covering most of the Brazilian territory. Its involvement in the media became an issue of high politics when one of its pastors in Recife, Northeast Brazil, accused the Church and above all its leader, of receiving money from Colombian drug-traffickers to fund the purchase. The polemics then grew murkier and murkier, and shriller and shriller. During 1991 articles appeared in the press (in particular the *Jornal do Brasil*) usually without a by-line, containing information leaked from the Federal Police (equivalent of the FBI) who were supposedly enquiring into the accusations; Macedo - whose title of Bishop ('*bispo*') is invariably ridiculed by newspapers printing it in italics - was briefly arrested on minor and unrelated charges, such as illegally importing a luxury motor car. No evidence or proper charges were ever brought, and it came to be known that *Veja*, Brazil's leading news weekly, had conducted some research into the drugs allegations and found nothing (though *Veja* did not reveal this publicly). It was noted - not least by followers of the Church themselves - that Leopoldo Collor, brother of the then President Fernando Collor, was a Director of Globo, and they linked this to the mysterious leaks and smears, believing that Globo was trying to undermine the competition represented by TV Record in the mass media market.

⁴ 'O Maestro, fa che io non cerchi tanto:/ ad essere consolato, quanto:/ a consolare/ ad essere compreso, quanto/ a comprendere/ ad essere amato, quanto ad amare/ *poiché donando si receive./ perdonando si é perdonati,/ morendo si risuscita a Vita Eterna*', St. Francis: *Preghiera semplice*. (Version sold as memento on the streets of Assisi, 1997).

TV Record seems to have a dual religious and secular/commercial agenda: it is evidently aiming to be a commercially viable, professional TV station, attracting a nation-wide audience and carrying advertising and mainstream non-religious programmes, broadcasting preaching and the testimony of converts during off-peak hours and all through the night. Although on occasion, its management has interfered to influence news or current affairs programmes in the Church's interests, these incidents have been few and declining in number, and the company has proved able to attract top-ranking newscasters and presenters. In the long run, the Church is said to envisage creating a cable station for its religious broadcasting, keeping its terrestrial facility for commercial transmission. For the time being however, the TV network is presumably being sustained by the contributions (*dízimo*, or 'tithe') of the Universal Church's followers.⁵

The other public domain in which the Church has intervened is politics. From a purely ideological point of view its positions are not distinguishable from those of other Pentecostal churches - insofar as any can be said to have an ideological approach to politics. But in these spheres style is as important as content and the difference is that the Universal Church intervenes with a high profile. Macedo's approach is not to form a political party, or to propound a political message in the manner of the Catholic bishops or the historic Protestant Churches, but rather to build local and state-level alliances, and to get individuals closely associated with himself and the upper echelons of his organization elected to municipal councils, State Assemblies and to the Federal Chamber of Deputies. For example, the State Governor of Rio de Janeiro appointed a nominee of Macedo's as Secretary of Labour and Social Action in 1995 (as a result of which the state government helped the Universal Church's building programme) and when he had to remove him in the wake of the *chute na Santa* scandal - of which more below - the Governor still replaced him with another person from the same Church (*JB*, 19/10/95). In tune with the notorious lack of party discipline in Brazilian politics, these alliances are more with personalities than with apparatuses, and reflect a strategy aimed at increasing the influence of Macedo himself and his Church in national politics. His representatives, like others from the Evangelical camp, only take positions of 'principle' on a small number of issues of personal morality (marriage, divorce, homosexuality, pornography, the death penalty⁶), their main function being to provide the political connections and influence which anyone seeking to build a media empire in Brazil would need. The only constant in Macedo's interventions has been his strong recommendation to his followers to vote against the two-time Presidential candidate of the left and leader of the PT, Lula. Thus, although Macedo supported Fernando Collor's election in 1990 (Pierucci and Prandi, 1996:196), and also his impeachment in 1993, and the election of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1994 and 1998, he cannot be said to be a close ally or associate of either of them.⁷

The ability of the Universal Church and its leader to keep moving ahead, his refusal to become stuck at a particular stage or on a particular issue is illustrated by his intervention in the NGO field. Whereas hitherto Pentecostal Churches have remained outside the NGO movement, and have confined their charitable work to prisons and to their own followers, in 1995 Macedo broke into this field, and thus into a domain previously dominated by Catholic and spiritist⁸ organizations, by creating the Universal Church's own NGO, catchily named the ABC (Associação Brasileira Cristão - Brazilian Christian

⁵TV Record differs from North American televangelism (itself now past its moments of glory) in that it uses television principally to encourage viewers to attend their local church, whereas the televangelists operate exclusively through the electronic medium; but it is quite possible that this will change.

⁶ Pierucci and Prandi (1996, chapter 7) document abundantly the posture of the *bancada evangélica*, or 'evangelical caucus' in the 1986 Constituent Assembly on these and related issues, including their support for the claim that rape against a woman's wishes is impossible. The authors omit, however, to note the evangelicals' opposition to the death penalty.

⁷ Protestant members of the National Congress in 1997 include 27 Deputies and 4 Senators; members of State Legislatures numbered some 55, and in the region of Rio de Janeiro the Universal Church on its own had 6 municipal representatives. More extensive political background to the Universal Church and on political implications of religious change in Brazil generally, can be found in Freston, 1993.

⁸ Spiritist organizations have an affinity to and overlap with, but are not precisely the same as possession cults, since frequently they devote themselves almost exclusively to spiritual healing and to charitable works - as opposed to possession, with all its paraphernalia of mediumship and communication with presiding entities derived from a pantheon of originally Yoruba deities.

Association). This was in response, doubtless, to the campaigns against violence and poverty known as 'Viva Rio' and 'Natal sem Fome' (Christmas without Hunger) organized by established intellectuals who, though broadly identified with the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* - Workers' Party), were well connected to the political and the financial establishment. Also in 1995 the Mayor of São Paulo (eternal presidential candidate Paulo Maluf) signed agreements with the Church and an Association of Homeless Persons (*Associação dos Sem Casa da Zona Sul*) for the purpose of establishing local medical centres (*JB*, 27-8-95) and the ABC, created to 'co-ordinate initiatives of a social nature', took over the control of charities such as the Pestalozzi Institute (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 17/9/95). In addition it is well known that like other Pentecostal Churches the Universal Church recruits actively in prisons and among reformed drug addicts. In short, in the NGO field as in the media, Macedo aims to contest establishment monopolies, and political or ideological preferences or differences - in the everyday sense of those words - are a minor, possibly irrelevant aspect of the challenge. If we understand the word 'political' to refer to relations of power and domination in a broader sense, however, then evidently the conflict is eminently political.

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Against this background it is not surprising that in 1995 a war broke out, pitting the Universal Church against the giant Globo TV network and also against a wide range of intellectuals, politicians, and religious associations and institutions. It is difficult to believe that the conflict with Globo was merely a commercial affair, given the enormous disproportion between the two contenders, and it is also difficult to believe it was about ideology, given what has already been said about the Church's political involvement. It seems rather to have been about the issues of cultural hegemony discussed at the start of this paper, and its interest for us is in the subsequent polemics against the Universal Church.

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The media war arose from two things: the first was the broadcast by Globo of a mini-series entitled *Decadência*, a thinly-veiled 'unmasking' of the Universal Church and its leader, Macedo, disguised as a depiction of the seamy side of life in an imaginary evangelical church (a theme at least as old, of course, as *Elmer Gantry*). The second was an occurrence in the middle of the night on the TV Record network, on October 12th when Brazil commemorates the country's patron, Our Lady of Aparecida. The Universal Church's original intention in the programme seems to have been to protest against the commemoration of the anniversary as an official (secular) Public Holiday (instituted only in 1980) on the grounds that it gave undue pre-eminence to Catholicism and that it legitimated 'idolatry'. In this incident Pastor Sergio von Helder, head of the Universal Church in São Paulo, and therefore one of Macedo's closest and most trusted collaborators, mocked an effigy of the Madonna and ridiculed it as a 'doll' and a 'piece of plaster', and even nudged it with his foot, provoking outrage throughout the country. The episode became known throughout the media as the '*chute na Santa*' (*chute* being the term for a kick derived from the English footballing expression 'shoot for goal'). Although the text of the self-same speech made on TV had been repeated by Federal and State Deputies linked to the Church in protest against this implicit recognition that the Catholic Church occupied a privileged position, it was only with this chute that the issue gained prominence.

TV Record had responded to the *Decadencia* mini-series with attacks on the violence and adultery featured in the *telenovelas* screened by Globo and watched daily by millions of Brazilians. But with the episode of the *chute na Santa* the Universal Church was back on the defensive. The reactions were as might be expected: denunciations and protests from politicians, processions to repair the dishonour (*desagravo*) inflicted on the Virgin and so on.⁹ The Catholic hierarchy, anxious to avoid fuelling religious conflict and intolerance, reacted with moderation: the Bishops' Conference and the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro called for calm and tolerance, while the few processions in Recife and elsewhere to repair the dishonour in 'atos de desagravo' were spontaneous and localized (*O Globo*, 19/10/95, 21/10/95, and 4/11/95; *Folha de S. Paulo*, 4/11/95. Edir Macedo also apologized publicly. But the polemics with TV Globo (not to be confused with the newspaper of the same name) and with the political class continued. In the first half of 1996 Globo's main evening news bulletin frequently

Note in this connection that the *chute* did not, strictly speaking, count as a sacrilegious act because the image involved was indeed, a 'doll', a reproduction, not having been blessed by a priest. Practising Catholics in Brazil take the blessing of an image very seriously as making the difference between images which are mere reproductions and those which deserve respect and veneration.

included the subject, together with the Globo management's responses to the Universal Church's statements - thus disproportionately inflating the dispute into an item of nation-wide importance. The leading print media demonized Edir Macedo and his 'sect' as a public enemy, calls were heard for the return of (Catholic) religious education to the public school system (to inoculate children against false prophets) and there were reports of much agonizing among the left-wing and left-liberal intelligentsia who felt uncomfortable in their coincidence of opinion with TV Globo. In retrospect, it is clear that the incident did little harm to the Universal Church's recruitment: to this day Rede Record and the Universal Church continue to grow.

This was not a religious dispute, in the sense of a dispute of a theological kind, or competition for a market, between different churches, as the muted reaction of the Catholic Church demonstrates. Although prominent personalities associated with *umbanda* and *candomblé* in the North-East of the country organized an 'act of solidarity' with the Catholic Church and the defiled Virgin (*O Globo*, 26/10/95), spokespeople for those cults complained that their repeated attempts to bring the aggression they were suffering at the hands of the Universal Church to the attention of the authorities and the Catholic hierarchy, had met with no response for several years (*Estado de S. Paulo*, 21/10/95). Rather the central question was political - the presumed manipulation of a naive and uneducated mass: the intellectual left has customarily denounced *telenovelas* for their narcotic effect on the political consciousness of the Brazilian masses. But the narcotic effect of the Universal Church's proclamations of divine healing and deliverance of devils, and the success of its brazen methods of extracting money from its followers, apart from showing that others were equally if not more adept at manipulation, also raised more complex questions than the *telenovelas*: for if the evidence that people were easily persuaded was visible in their donations to the Church and its rapid growth, how could the assumption of a manipulated mass be reconciled with the Church's contestatory stand in the face of the entire cultural order? And was the hostility not explained by the place held by the intelligentsia in that cultural order? The *telenovelas* were criticized (rightly or wrongly) for lulling the masses into a dreamland by parading before them a fantasy world of rich but unhappy people. The poor could admire or envy the rich, but never ever become rich themselves. In contrast the Universal Church was accused of persuading its followers that the dreamland was 'for real', and of taking their money in advance of its delivery on that dream. This combination of the theme of credulity and financial confidence trickery turns out to have deep roots in Brazil, and also to illuminate the underlying issues at stake in these apparently exaggerated polemics.

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CONFLICT IN THE MEDIA

The 'revolutionary' character of a movement or party is usually assessed by reading its texts and studying its actions. The reactions of the opposition are treated dismissively as exaggerated, paranoid and self-interested. Yet the fairness or accuracy of the conservative reaction is not the issue: the language and categories used by its spokespeople direct us to the raw nerves being touched by the revolutionary movement or, as in the case of the Universal Church, by a movement which is hardly revolutionary, but is operating against the grain of prevailing norms of good taste and political acceptability.

Money

The constructions of the conflict in the media can be summarized in the oppositions between popular and high culture (with all the projections that embodies), between marginality and inclusion, between rationality and ignorance - which to some extent double as wealth and poverty - between magic and either educated agnosticism or Catholic belief, and between 'approved' and 'unauthorized' magic. On the themes of wealth and ignorance, the main Brazilian newspapers and also many people one speaks to in the ordinary course of life (not only the well-off) agree with the phrase in the *Jornal do Brasil* describing Edir Macedo as no more than a *caça-niquel* (a gaming machine). The Church in their view is merely a vehicle for the enrichment of Macedo and his cronies at the expense of the ignorant poor who naïvely believe in their cures and their promise of riches, and it seems indeed that the Universal Church does collect millions of dollars every week, with which to finance its TV network, its building operations, and the salaries of its pastors and employees. It has also been accused of *charlatanismo* -

notably in a suit brought by the highly respectable Spiritist Association of Rio de Janeiro (*O Globo*, 22/10/95). As we shall see, this is tantamount to a criminal accusation in Brazilian law.

The Universal Church uses two methods to raise money. It tries to persuade its followers to make their contributions on a regular basis, by committing them to weekly attendance at services on a particular theme for a period, or by sending them home with an envelope and a commitment to return at a later date, or at regular weekly intervals, bringing the envelope with the sum promised, thus raising the sums involved, but also developing loyalty to the Church. The other method is a highly visible and audible ritual during all services, which may last about half an hour, when preachers call upon those present to make donations. This is an aggressive sales pitch, in which the congregation's members are invited to donate, first a high figure and then gradually less, until eventually someone goes to the front and gives a sum to one of the church workers arrayed at the front of the church. Thereafter almost everyone steps forward and deposits something in the proffered collection bags. The preachers insist that giving is not an obligation but they also assure their listeners with that same phrase - 'only by giving can you receive'. This key phrase has many possible interpretations: that their donations will be rewarded by material prosperity in their own lives; that the donations will enable the Church to work on their behalf; that giving somehow ensures the receipt of divine grace or ensures salvation. Perhaps in a defensive reaction to the accusation that they are abusing the ignorance of the poor, preachers emphasize that donations to the Church are not a condition of divine grace or salvation; however, they do say to the faithful that their donations are essential to keep 'your Church' or 'our Church' going. However, conversations 'on the ground' with followers¹⁰ show that a standard reaction does associate the phrase with the prospect of wealth and a relationship of reciprocity with the Church. Giving is a central feature of all Evangelical and Pentecostal church membership, and this Church is by no means the only one to promise riches in return, but whereas other Churches emphasize the regularity and predictability of donations as dues entitling members to take part in certain rituals (especially the monthly communion service or *santa ceia*) the Universal Church emphasizes the size of the donation and the reciprocity encapsulated in the slogan just mentioned, and is also distinguished by the aggressiveness of its demands for money and the ostentatious expenditure of the proceeds: on TV and radio stations, on grandiose acts of worship in the Maracaná stadium in Rio de Janeiro or the Victoria stadium in Bahia, on expansion to North America and Europe and so on. In 1995 the Universal Church was said to have 1,700 places of worship in Brazil and 300 outside the country (*Jornal do Brasil*, 9/10/95) and in a single week in October 1995 it opened three churches, of which one had a 300-space car park. This is very different from other Evangelical or Pentecostal Churches.

Sociologists rarely focus on the role of money in religious affairs, but the insistent attention of the Brazilian press to the financial side of the Universal Church, and the Church's own unwillingness to open its accounts¹¹ or reveal anything about them at all, show that the subject is sensitive.¹² The Church's own secretiveness on this score is not surprising, and is doubtless related to the enrichment of its leader and also to the 'performance-related' incentives it gives to its pastors and preachers. But the shrill and obsessive media comment on the donations made by the Church's followers may teach us something about Brazilian society and culture, for it shows that in the media it is taken for granted that the poor do not have independent judgement and are not capable of disinterested donation. Thus an editorial in the *Jornal do Brasil* (28/10/95) writes of the 'mercantilistic exploitation of the people's credulity', and the 'scenes of explicit quackery staged by preachers who go hither and thither carrying suitcases stuffed with money. The editorial continues by denouncing Macedo as a 'notorious charlatan' who customarily purchases his radio and television stations with cash of 'dubious origin' and his propagandists as an 'oily mafia who behave as if they had a franchise from God himself'. In this perspective, the poor are not to be trusted with their own money, but should, by implication, spend it in accordance with the views of the guardians of *bien-rangé* citizenship. Thus one hears approval of the

¹⁰ Reference is made here to field work conducted in Salvador da Bahia in 1991 and 1993, see Lehmann, (1996).

¹¹ Even to the Brazilian Evangelical Association - whose leader in any case disassociated himself from the Universal Church in the wake of the *chute na Santa* - see below.

¹² There is also plenty of mockery - as in the theme song of the 1996 Bahia carnival: *Show Satanas*, or the showing of a scantily clad woman re-enacting the *chute* for an underwear advertisement on TV (*O Globo*, 28/10/95).

evangelical obsession with respectability and clean living, and of their prohibition on tobacco and alcohol, in recognition of the ravages alcohol in particular can wreak on the lives of the poor, but disapproval of donations to Macedo's Church. The Universal Church, however, has brought Pentecostalism, a religion of dissent, out of the tame ghettos of poverty and puritanism, in an effort to appeal to the young and to followers of youth culture, and to more educated people than those who generally form the evangelicals' clientele. It has projected a far less prudish image than the 'traditional' Pentecostal Churches, especially in matters of dress and sexual behaviour, and has also avoided an obsessive concern with the prohibition on tobacco and alcohol - though these are clearly and strongly discouraged among its members. This difference in emphasis has also probably helped the Universal Church to 'climb up' the social scale more rapidly than those other churches, as evidenced for example by the new churches it opens in middle-class areas: as it loosens its early exclusive identification with the impoverished masses, so Pentecostalism's cultural and political authority increase, and so its dissent becomes more threatening.

Charlatanism

Given the cultural prominence of possession cults and their accompanying panoply of cures, demons and protective spirits, it is not surprising that in Brazil the evocation of the naïveté and gullibility of the poor, weak and defenseless (including especially women) has for long been linked both to the idea of magic and thus charlatanism, and to the idea that the state, or the legal¹³ (and thus for decades, even centuries, the intellectual) establishment, must exercise tutelage over them. The influential work of Yvonne Maggie (1992) has disinterred an entire genre and a political tradition from the archives of the police and the courts, as witness the following extract from an accusation of 'charlatanism' brought in 1906, which must be quoted in the original to convey the full flavour of legalistic bombast and jargon. The prosecutor accused the defendant of

exercício de ocultismo em proveito de um charlatão que se ia locupletando com a credulidade alheia.... com essa profissão vendo aumentar sua clientela de mulheres histéricas e indivíduos credulos, ia explorar a bolsa do público, até que resolví embargar o estelionato...(Maggie, 1992:79)

(practice of the occult for the benefit of a charlatan who was manipulating other people's credulity... using this profession to extend his clientele of hysterical women and gullible individuals, gaining access to people's wallets, until I decided to put an end to this fraudulent trickery...)

This was part of a lengthy - though ultimately unsuccessful - case brought in 1906 under Article 157 of the Penal Code - precursor, as we shall see, of the self-same Article under which a suit was brought by the Public Prosecutor of São Paulo against the Universal Church in 1995, - and its interest lies not only in the content of the accusations, but also in the legal force of the vocabulary: words such as *charlatanismo*, *ocultismo*, hysteria, the 'exploitation' of the ordinary man's wallet - all these carry a legal meaning and force, and thus, in a culture where *bacharelismo*,¹⁴ the lawyer's style of delivery, at once archaic and bombastic, was for 150 years the dominant rhetorical style of politics, a political force. The menacing use of these same terms in the polemics against the Universal Church reflects likewise the threat of legal action, even political reprisal.

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Possession and deliverance

¹³ It should be recalled in this connection that the legal education system produced not just lawyers but the entire intellectual elite from the early colonial period until the recent emergence of economists and technocrats to displace the predominance of lawyers. The figure of the *bacharel* (Bachelor - i.e. qualified lawyer) encompasses a type of rhetoric, a style of writing, oracular and archaic, which was prevalent in politics and high culture, and continues to have its influence in the editorial pages of the newspapers.

¹⁴ The title of *bacharel* is equivalent to that of Bachelor as in Bachelor of Arts etc. However, in Portuguese it refers specifically to a lawyer's university degree, while *bacharelismo* is a rhetorical style characterized by a language exaggerated in its floweriness and its archaic usage.

The Universal Church has brought the devil into Brazilian politics. Mainstream Pentecostalism places great emphasis on the gift of the Spirit, and on 'speaking in tongues' as a sign of that gift. It also propagates a strong belief in the power of the devil, as manifested, *inter alia*, in the 'pagan' cults of Africa and Latin America. But the mainstream Pentecostals do not make a *performance* of the diabolic, or of their campaigns against the diabolic. In contrast the Universal Church downplays gifts of the Spirit and more or less ignores glossolalia (speaking in tongues), but makes of exorcism its central focus and rite of passage, an integral part of the conversion experience. This intense concentration on themes which accentuate the power relations between Church and convert extends to healing: while other Churches proclaim healing as one of the many virtues of faith this one raises it to a pre-eminent place contemporary with and almost indistinguishable from conversion. The concentration is also temporal as well as thematic: other Churches calibrate the gifts of the Spirit in a series of rites of passage subject to institutional control and certification, whereas in the Universal Church the entire process of awakening is collapsed into a single devastating conversion-deliverance-healing experience.

This procedure concentrates power in the exorcist - i.e. the Church itself, through personnel trained to present themselves in a highly impersonal way to the people attending services and to deliver them from the devils which possess them. Since the possession cults also focus on the power relation between medium and client, it is not therefore entirely surprising that the Universal Church has taken a radically innovative approach by confronting them in their own language and using many of their terms and symbols and with a ferocity which occasionally has reached the point of physical aggression (Soares, 1990). Even while deploying an elaborately choreographed and orchestrated host of symbols and ritual elements from the cults, its preachers deliver people from devils identified as entities in that self-same 'Afro-Brazilian' pantheon. It has introduced into its 'liturgy' practices which even have the same name as practices in the cults - such as the *correntes*,¹⁵ a term which in the cults refers to a ceremony performed while participants stand in a ring, and in the Universal Church to a weekly service theme, such as prosperity, or deliverance (*libertação*). This symbolic promiscuity has caused serious offence not only to the practitioners of the cults, but also to those who regard 'Afro-Brazilian culture' as a central element of Brazilian national identity.

From the point of view of the people involved in the cults themselves, the Universal Church has subverted and stolen their 'system'. The cults conceive of a person as *both* possessing *and* being possessed by certain entities of supernatural provenance who are incorporated (almost literally) into that person: these can sometimes be evil, and they may have been incorporated into a person at the time of involvement in the cults. The services of a medium are required to come to terms with, satisfy or tame these spirits, or *orixas*. The Universal Church gives an entirely new meaning to possession while at the same time manipulating the many meanings and associations it brings from the culture of *umbanda* and *candomblé*. The main twist - obviously inspired by Christian concepts of the diabolical - is that for the Universal Church these entities are independently mobile spirits, not characteristics of a person, and they are thus able to move between people, especially among members of a kin group, and even to 'target' them. It is a quite different concept of possession from that used in the possession cults.

Thus the exorcism or deliverance practised by the Universal Church literally (again) demonizes (in order to 'deliver') entire families and may liberate demons from one person which then circulate about the family (see Birman, 1997 for a detailed account of this argument). In undertaking this (literally and metaphorically) spectacular manipulation of the imagery and symbolism of *umbanda* and *candomblé*, the Universal Church is playing with fire. The practitioners of the cults are being attacked and feel ridiculed. The keepers of Brazil's identity see the country's heritage being turned into a freak-show. Macedo's exorcists must seem to the *mães* and *pais de santo* to have taken elaborate ceremonies requiring years of apprenticeship, ritual initiation and sacrifice, and turned them into a mockery, the religious and ritual equivalent of, precisely, 'fast-food'.

Until the *chute na Santa* episode there were no instances of confrontation between the Universal Church and the Catholic Church. Indeed, even that incident, as we have seen, was really an ill-conceived sub-plot in a campaign by the Universal Church not against the Catholic Church, but against Catholicism's privileged status in the public and political spheres and in favour of a completely secular state. However, the Catholic Church may fear that the Universal Church's uncompromising approach

¹⁵ The word also means 'necklace'.

to the cults as more of a threat than its possible divergences with Catholicism. The attitude of the Catholic hierarchy has since the late 19th century been one of official hostility to 'paganism', but the practical reality since a period of state repression in the 1930s has been one of indulgence.

The symbolic and ideological moment is therefore highly sensitive and ironic. The Catholic Church, already facing very serious competition from 'below', as the Pentecostals make inroads among the poor, finds itself threatened from 'above' in the sense that the Universal Church disputes its role as arbitrator of the symbolically and ritually acceptable. And where the Catholic Church has been relatively open-minded, and has sought to soften polarities, the Universal Church is intolerant and seeks to harden polarities. Indeed, its appropriation, and reinterpretation, of the symbolism and moral meanings of possession cults place it in direct confrontation with the cults, and its penchant for grandiose buildings in central locations place it in confrontation with the Catholic Church.

Thus the absence of direct doctrinal confrontation, of dispute about basic values, does not signify an absence of competition. On the contrary, it shows that in matters of religious hegemony, symbolism and the routines of daily life count for much more than doctrine, and that the Universal Church has understood this very well. The attack on the possession cults thus is also an attack on the Catholic Church and the cultural elites who tolerate and even honour them as elements of a nation identity, built on a positive valuation of syncretism, which has been accepted very broadly ever since the *Semana da Arte Moderna* in 1922 (Pereira de Queiroz, 1988).

All this in turn forms part of a project, which it shares with all fundamentalist religious movements, to undermine popular culture and especially popular culture as constructed - again - by the elites, that is to say as the bearer of tradition and as a complex of practices rooted in the historical identity of the people.

Magic and the Law

This Pentecostalism is, then, more undesirable than others because of its defiance of two constructions of popular religion which reassure the elites: the *bien rangé* Pentecostalism of the Assemblies, the Four-Square Gospel Church and the like, but also the world of the cults which, as inferred above, is a cherished - but tame - repository of a certain idea of Brazil - the Brazil which goes back to Africa and keeps its African traditions alive. The Universal Church takes elements from the cults and from Pentecostalism and uses them in a defiant way to offend the cultural establishment. It takes money from its followers but not, like the cults, in the context of a clientelistic relationship: the anonymous relationship between the Church and its followers is something new in Brazil. The Church has wrenched the discourses of healing and possession out of the domestication into which they had fallen, and has inserted them in a discourse of dissidence, of scandal, provoking a self-defense mechanism in the form of a revival of well-worn rhetoric and legal instruments originally forged to control 'black' magic.

We thus observe the rebirth of the ancient opposition of magic and witchcraft, or 'good' and 'bad' ('white' and 'black') magic in a new register, namely that of evangelical religion and its relationship with the political and cultural establishments.

In the resurgence of the legal apparatus and rhetoric of witchcraft accusation, the accused is of course Edir Macedo, described as a 'self-styled' bishop who has built up a fortune on the backs of the poor, whose followers are not believers but victims of his deceit. The division between acceptable and unacceptable magic is now iterated in a division between acceptable and unacceptable religion or faith, and the language of commerce is used to denigrate the Universal Church, described as a 'religious supermarket', 'an investment fund managed in heaven', the 'religious shopping mall', 'fast food religion' (*o fast-food da religião*, with 'fast-food' retained in the original English), the 'market', the 'gaming machine' etc., and the legal genealogy of the categorization of magic is extended into the

accusations that Macedo has received drug money, has been involved in 'active corruption', and in the perversion of justice or suborning of witnesses (*Isto É*, October 1995).¹⁶

The newspaper accounts of the *chute*, in conjunction with Yvonne Maggie's (1992) analysis enable us to grasp the continuity of language between the accusations aimed at practitioners of sorcery/witchcraft, and *macumba*, and those aimed at Macedo, with respect both to the difficulties experienced by the dominant political and cultural rhetoric in encompassing the Pentecostal phenomenon, and also to the ways in which the phenomenon is divided into the 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable'. For example, the charge of *charlatanismo* laid at his door uses a term adopted in Brazilian law to refer to the 'abuse' of spiritism. The broader category of *espiritismo* (spiritism), was removed from the Penal Code after 1940, under pressure from liberal penal theorists, being replaced by the crime of 'abuse' of spiritism. This idea of 'abuse' depends on the notion of 'taking advantage of the gullibility or good faith of others' (*aproveitar a boa fe alheia, or a credulidade alheia*) which crops up repeatedly in 1995 and more broadly in media comment on the Universal Church, and is an established legal concept in Brazil, if not in the statutes themselves, then certainly in judicial proceedings. Accusations sometimes shade into *estelionato*, meaning swindling, confidence trickery, or a fraudulent purchase or sale (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 21/10/95). The result is that when it comes to proving a case, in court or in the media, much depends on the ability of lawyers, or publicists, to convince a judge - or the public - of the intentions of one party and the gullibility of the other. The use of the practices themselves is not at issue, nor indeed is their curative efficacy.

In the rhetoric surrounding the Universal Church, as in the legal cases of witchcraft and witchcraft accusation, none of those involved express any doubt, at least in principle, with respect to the efficacy of the 'cure'. And in those cases they use what Maggie calls the 'sociological' interpretation - applied no longer to magic but now to Pentecostalism. That is, commentators - most prominent among them the Catholic Church itself in innumerable statements on the subject - take it for granted that Pentecostalism is a solution for the poor who cannot afford proper medical treatment, who need relief of a psychological or mystical kind in the absence of any improvement in their material lot, who have lost their sense of identity and the stable norms of tradition in a violently changing society, and who easily fall prey to religious propagandists making deft use of modern media and culture. Their main objection is that the poor are giving money to the cause.

The resemblance can be pursued also into the ways in which the field of magic and now of Pentecostalism is divided by the media into the acceptable and the unacceptable, 'good' and 'bad', 'white' and 'black'. The structure of this division between 'magic' and 'sorcery', the fundamental opposition underlying all legal and rhetorical interventions on the subject, is now applied to the opposition between the Universal Church and other Pentecostal Churches: the language of legal bombast used against this Church is never used against the Assemblies of God, the Four-Square Gospel Church etc. which are less noisy, less openly political, less attuned to modern media, though equally committed to constant expansion and, in purely doctrinal terms, not essentially different from the Universal Church.

In Catholicism miracles are rare. In the Universal Church the miracle is reduced to the banality of the quotidian: it happens in innumerable places of worship on a daily basis, and there is no religious apparatus to certify the miraculous. Furthermore, the rhetoric of the Church's preachers leads people to believe that a miracle can (almost) be purchased by their contributions to the cause. Once again, a challenge to accepted modes of procedure, not only, and certainly not principally, at the doctrinal level, but at the level of the popular imaginary. For in all Latin popular cultures the relationship with the divine is mediated by petitions and favours, and always through intermediaries - the local saint, the Virgin Mary, etc. In the rhetoric of the Universal Church, the miracle is portrayed as the outcome of an act of faith and perceived as the return of a monetary contribution.

Here too we observe a continuity between the terms of this conflict and the earlier attempts to apply the law to the suppression of charlatanism. Where once the issue had been that of challenges or threats

¹⁶ In addition to the drug money accusation already quoted, the widely read weekly news magazine *Isto É* writes of suspicions that Macedo paid one of his pastors not to give evidence of a certain kind to the police.

to the monopoly of legitimate medical treatment, and eventually to the legitimate practice of mediumship and possession (there was even an official register of cults for a brief period after 1930) now it is the implicit threat to the more nebulous, less formal religious monopoly enjoyed by Catholicism, and perhaps more broadly to the cultural hegemony enjoyed by an intelligentsia and a political class educated and formed in a culture of Catholicism.

In addition, and more significantly, the banality of Macedo's miracles is also a challenge to the construction of the supernatural in the kaleidoscopic syncretic image built up by the media, the state and certain tendencies among the intelligentsia during the 20th century. To follow the twist, let us recall the account, again in Maggie (1992:226ff.) of a similar row which erupted in 1972 (at the height of the military dictatorship, when people were being routinely tortured and 'disappeared') over the appearance on television (Globo again, as it happens) of Seu Sete, a flamboyant practitioner of cures drawn from the tradition of the possession cults who deployed the resources of theatrical performance and audience manipulation, complete with the imagery of black magic and of prestidigitation, mixing 'Afro' and 'pop' music and much else besides. In the ensuing polemics - in which the issue of political censorship was intertwined with that of cultural propriety - the spokespersons of then fashionable 'counter-culture' and of the world of modern art and dance, defended Seu Sete, on the grounds that like all of the 'Afro-Brazilian' rites, he represented a counter-culture and a counter-society - what might also be called an 'alternative society'. Twenty-five years later, the defense of the cults, portrays them more in terms of their authenticity and faithfulness to tradition and to 'roots' than on the grounds of their 'alternative' character (Dantas, 1988, and by analogy, Fry, 1983b). Practices once regarded as exploitative or potentially dangerous and subject to attack, repression or regulation by the Catholic Church, as well as in the medical profession and the judiciary, are today portrayed as cherished embodiments of tradition, ritual and custom (Pereira de Queiroz, 1992). Possession cults and carnivals are publicized by tourist agencies as representing, respectively, the exotic, or distinctive, culture of Brazil. The place they once held in the demonology of establishment displeasure (again, left and right, conservative and liberal) has been taken by none other than the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. For although - or indeed because - it borrows promiscuously from the theatricals of the cults, the Universal Church denies the new elite's 'autochthonous' notion of popular culture and traditions, proclaiming instead a new era of consumer culture and cultural globalization, of 'bad taste' which subverts the elite's more tame concept of the culture of the people. The experience is particularly discomfiting for those who see in that 'rooted' concept of popular culture a fertile ground for sowing the seeds of their preferred path of political change.

The legal 'Battle'

The legal reaction to the *chute* was fast and furious: on October 17th the 5th Police District of Rio de Janeiro received a '*queixa-crime*', or denunciation; the 13th 'Vara Criminal' or Criminal Court of Rio de Janeiro opened a case under Article 208 of the Penal Code which defines 'crimes against religious belief' (*crime contra sentimento religioso*); a retired judge brought a case in the city's 27th Police District; in São Paulo a State Deputy made two petitions to the Public Prosecutor, announced a suit for 'racial discrimination', and requested the closure of all churches belonging to the Universal Church as well as TV Record (*O Globo*, 17/10/95). The reason for the 'racial discrimination' case was that in the broadcast the speaker, Pastor Von Helder had called the effigy 'black and therefore ugly'. A similar case was brought by the 'Council for the Development and Participation of the Black Community of São Paulo'. The Mayor of the town of Aparecida itself, where the effigy had been found in 1717, issued a decree forbidding any religious construction within 6 km. of the Sanctuary - a measure directed specifically at the Universal Church which was planning to buy yet another cinema in the vicinity; and in the neighbouring town of Campo Belo the Police initiated a case against the Church on the charge of *vilipendiar publicamente objeto de culto religioso* (public denigration of a religious object) again under Article 208 of the Penal Code. Cases were brought in late 1995 by the Human Rights Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, by the Mayor of the town of Aparecida (again), by three independent lawyers, by various other Public Prosecutors and even by a seamstress who demanded the return of a sewing machine she had donated to the Church (which was duly returned *Folhade S. Paulo*, 24/10/95). In the course of the separate, but parallel, investigation into the origin of the funds used for the purchase of TV Record, Macedo spent 12 days in prison.

The other statutes under which proceedings have been brought against the Universal Church are Articles 283, 284 and 285 of the Penal Code originally drawn up in 1890 to deal with unqualified or illegal practice of medicine (*curandeirismo* or quackery) and, for example, with magic, cartomancy, charms and talismans - though the revision of 1942 had removed the criminal character of spiritism itself, leaving only charlatanism, and 'black magic' in the form of *macumba* and *candomblé* (Maggie, 1992:47). In Recife a Universal Church pastor was indicted for 'desacato a autoridade, resistencia a prisão, charlatanismo, curandeirismo e formação de quadrilha' ('disrespect for authority, resisting arrest, charlatanism, illegal practice of medicine, and conspiracy') (*JB*, 27/19/95) - though the case came to nothing, as most did. In the end only the case under Article 208 was successful, culminating 18 months later on 30 April 1997 with a suspended two-year sentence passed against Macedo for denigration of an object of religious worship by the 12th District Court of São Paulo - followed by triumphal, but tearful, visits by Macedo to various of his churches.

The formal legal proceedings were matched by a mobilization of quasi-legal threats and rhetoric in the press and televised media. Thus the image of the unscrupulous Macedo and his Church taking money and possessions from the gullible poor became mixed up with that of *estelionato*, or confidence trickery, while a battery of standard politico-legal elements relating to corruption, to the scandals of the Collor administration, were also brought into play. The approval of TV Record's application for a licence by the Franco administration (which succeeded that of Collor in 1994) was attributed to the timely intervention of a particular (unnamed) Minister.

Clientelism

Brazil has a long history of highly influential and sophisticated efforts by intellectuals to portray their country as a distinctive cultural entity, concentrating on race relations, as in Freyre's interpretation of the legacy of plantation society and slavery, on rituals of inequality and its inversion, as in Damatta's interpretation of carnival, and on the social manipulation of inequality in relations of personal dependence, such as in Buarque de Holanda's 'homen cordial', Antonio Candido's '*Dialectica do Malandragem*' ('dialectics of scoundrelry') and Damatta's 'relational society'. A central theme in all this literature is the combination of tolerance and clientelism, of pluralism and of relationships of personal dependence cementing extreme social inequalities.

There is also a long history of politicians involving themselves in the life of the cults and other celebrations of 'popular religion': *umbanda* officiants, priests and priestesses, known as *pais de santo* and *mães de santo* are standard operators in the micro-politics of clientelism and electoral mobilization; politicians make a point of appearing at the public celebrations of religious festivals, Catholic, 'African' and 'syncretic'. And in Rio de Janeiro politicians of innumerable parties have been involved in a grandiose attempt to institutionally 'bless' the cults with a so-called *macumbódromo* (evoking the vast concrete *sambódromo* with banked seating constructed in the city centre by Governor Brizola in the 1980s for the carnival parade.)

It is essential therefore, in interpreting the response to Macedo and his Church from a range of elite sources, irrespective of ideological or political orientation, to recall that although in many respects he is using the time-honoured methods of Brazilian politics, there are certain crucial ways in which he is departing from those methods. On the one hand the mirroring of the elite's practices by this 'man from nowhere' who 'owes nothing to anybody', provokes serious discomfiture among the elite. His methods are traditional in the knitting together of mini-alliances at local, state and federal level, in the unashamed *fisiologismo* - that is, self-interested, short-term advantage irrespective of ideological considerations - pursued by his parliamentary representatives in the National Congress. On the other hand, Macedo and his Church depart from standard practices because their proclamation of the material rewards arising from conversion and from financial contributions to their Church is quite different from the structure of promises prevalent in Brazilian political culture - and indeed the political culture of most countries. In the standard pattern followers provide support, possibly but not necessarily in the form of votes, in exchange for a prospect of material gain. This gain can be either individual or communal, and if it is communal it is generally restricted to a small group of identifiable people with, so to speak, names and addresses: a village school, a neighbourhood sewage system and the like. The

operation is based on a free rider principle: the promise may or may not be made good, and the followers will regard it with perhaps extreme scepticism, but the bargain depends on the knowledge that if the promise is made good it will be of benefit to identifiable individuals or groups of people and above all that there is little to be gained by a refusal of support. All that would follow from opting out of the system on the part of individual or groups who feel abused or insulted by this method of doing politics, is the zero probability of benefit and the prospect that the loss to one individual or group will be a gain for another (Olson, 1965).

In contrast Macedo does not promise himself to deliver anything material at all. The Church's relation with its followers constantly invokes an element of self-empowerment and self-transformation, so that the exchange is not precisely between two parties, but involves a belief that the individual herself (for most of the followers are women) is contributing to her own personal transformation: joining a church, giving on a regular basis to it, are part of a package in which the main admonition is 'get a grip on your life', 'put some order into your life'.¹⁷ To be sure, church networks can help people to solve the big dramas in their lives (employment and illness), but the relationship with the Church is not the single-stranded dyadic exchange of clientelist politics in which political and cultural establishments would frame their interpretations and accusations. Macedo's political rivals and opponents believe that his followers vote according to his prescriptions - if indeed they do - simply because they believe his message. Sensing the subversive potential of this method of political mobilization, they try to attach it to the Procrustean bed of clientelism which prevails in traditional politics. But they are mistaken.

The radical departure represented by the practices of the Universal Church, and indeed of other Pentecostal Churches, can be seen in their very inversion of clientelism: far from offering to put something *into* the people's pockets, they are extracting money *from* their pockets: they are certainly not *buying* their votes, either literally or figuratively. The Churches may encourage voting for candidates of the right (sometimes, and in Presidential elections usually) but its practices are not for that any the less subversive of the political methods of the 'right'. More complex ironies arise from a confrontation of the Pentecostals' anti-elite practices with those of the anti-elite left, itself deeply hostile to clientelism - or as it calls it, *assistencialismo* - and adept at more modern, grass roots-oriented or *basista* practices. The *basistas* disdain the Universal Church for ignoring the structural causes of poverty, but in doing so they ignore the attractions - though not of course necessarily the efficacy - of the Pentecostal call to people to confront poverty and violence inside the home and the family, and also express their discomfiture at the appropriation of the discourse of the miraculous, which they of course regard with disdain.

Underlying the accusation of fraud and exploitation there is a response to Macedo's offer of alternative salvations. In the Catholic, especially the post-Conciliar, imaginary a sense of shame is associated with wealth: the post-Conciliar church preaches the virtues of 'liberation' and of the long journey through the wilderness which might lead thereto, but not those of prosperity; it preaches love and solidarity, not joy and ecstatic possession. In this discourse, personal material advancement is conditional and liable to impose responsibilities and to bring temptation, whereas in the discourse of the Universal Church it is unconditional and constitutes its own reward: the neutrality of money as a medium of giving democratizes the distribution of divine grace, because, in this context, it is the colour of a person's money not their social status that counts, whether that status is positively or negatively valued. The efficacy of miracles does not depend on the exceptional mediation of saints or of the hierarchy: the reduction of the 'miraculous' to the level of banality makes it part of daily life, incorporated into the weekly rhythm of church services and tithing.

By emphasizing the giving of money, the Universal Church inverts the assumptions on which the accusation of fraud and trickery are based, and its followers deny the condition of servility which would render them vulnerable to the trickery. Furthermore, the idea of prosperity as propounded by the Universal Church is even more offensive to Catholic ears than that of divine healing, because in the discourse of post-Conciliar Catholicism, wealth is never associated with virtue or salvation, salvation itself being conditional on suffering and renunciation.

¹⁷ A teenage follower interviewed in a church in Salvador da Bahia made it clear that although '*Jesus da um jeito na vida da gente*' ('Jesus can give a hand in one's life') she expected and was also expected to make a serious effort (Lehmann, 1996).

It is therefore not surprising that in the demonization of the Universal Church its attackers tend to reduce its propounded utopia to a purely monetary dimension, using the imagery of consumer capitalism, and suppressing the other elements which go to make up the dreamland it offers to its followers: a life of happy marriages, of peace and security, free of drugs, violence and homosexuality. For by reducing the Church's relationship with its followers to one defined by an exchange of money for illusory deliverance, it both denies the scope of the notion of happiness propounded by the Universal Church and also opens the way to denunciations of fraudulent practice formulated in the language of the Penal Code.

The Catholic vision is of a real but never-ending *caminhada* leading to an ever-receding Kingdom of virtue and justice at the end of the horizon. For those who translate the *caminhada* into a political struggle the Kingdom is more concrete than for others, but for all it is of its nature unattainable, while the struggle to get there is all too real. Edir Macedo's Church offers miraculous solutions all day, every day, requiring not a long hard struggle against all the odds but a mere leap of faith. 'Folk' Catholicism expects that the petitioner contributes to the Church at least by buying a candle, and if possible with more, in the hope that this will help to pass an exam, to cure an ailing relative, and so on. These, one might say, are attainable favours rather than 'exorbitant' demands. The preachers in the Universal Church, in contrast, offer exorbitant benefits and demand exorbitant contributions; they deny that there is a direct connection between the two by reaffirming the doctrine of the gratuity of the grace of God, but at the same time they endlessly repeat the motto - 'only by giving will you receive'. This is at once in tune with the pervasiveness of cures and charms in Brazilian culture, through *umbanda* and its numerous offshoots, possession, mediumship and the like - yet also in disharmony with the measured character of the operation of the supernatural and the saintly in Catholicism. In the Universal Church the miraculous is also pervasive but it is anything but measured; it is shovelled out in large quantities and unceremoniously, as in the 'supermarket' jibe. Furthermore, a version of the miraculous is being propagated which challenges as openly as is imaginable the sacrificial and flagellatory dimensions of the Catholic rituals and the in-group involvements and esotericism of the possession cults, by opening it up to literally everybody and by rendering limitless the rewards of faith and - at least implicitly - of monetary contribution.

The response of the enlightened intelligentsia, the political class, and the Catholic hierarchy has been to portray the rewards of faith advertised by the Universal Church as merely a matter of consumption, ignoring that the prosperity proclaimed by the Universal Church encompasses sex, status, money, marriage, the health of one's children, freedom from the scourges of drugs, violence, unemployment - in short a point-by-point inversion of the ills of Brazilian society. Negating the utopian dimension of its message, they accuse the Church of *estelionato* - of obtaining money by fraudulent means. Just as political dissent is often dismissed and cheapened by those who, fearing loss of property or status, brand it a criminal activity, so here a religious discourse which subverts a set of symbolic relationships underpinning the established order is likewise criminalised, or at least cheapened.

From the point of view of the Catholic Church and its various tendencies, the chute na Santa offered a rare opportunity to form a united front. Both the followers of Papal orthodoxy and the *basistas* devoted to the cause of the People's Church and Liberation Theology have in recent years been trying to come to terms and cope with the rise of Pentecostalism, and in various ways have blamed each other for its success. Here was a chance for the bishops to come out together, at once asking for favours from the government in the form of access to the airwaves, and also mobilizing 'the poor, the marginalized, and the landless' in support of the Virgin 'mother of the poor and excluded'. With some calling for repression of the 'sects' and others the mobilization of the marginalized, all tendencies found a place in these appeals. Even the Charismatic Renewal movement, an apolitical Pentecostalism within the Catholic Church with hundreds of thousands of followers, joined in, announcing the formation of its own political party. The recognition of equal status to all religions and churches in the recent Constitution of 1987 was forgotten as the Church called for the re-establishment of religious (i.e. Catholic) education while protesting against the claim by the Universal Church that it should receive similar subsidies to those received by the Catholic Church. In short, the old clientelistic reflexes were - albeit briefly and probably ineffectively - revived.

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