



# THE ROLE OF THE BRAZILIAN UNIVERSAL CHURCH OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE GLOBALIZATION OF NEO-PENTECOSTALISM TODAY\*

## O PAPEL DA IGREJA UNIVERSAL BRASILEIRA DO REINO DE DEUS NA GLOBALIZAÇÃO DO NEOPENTECOSTALISMO ATUAL

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## ABSTRACT

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This article presents the “export” of the Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) to countries in virtually all the continents. The case of countries where the IURD is strong is analysed, as well as examples of countries where it was not successful. The basic premise of this article is that the IURD works with contextualization in the countries where it enters. For many reasons, there is no master key able to open the doors of success for this church in all countries. Nevertheless, in spite of some failures, it may be considered a successful enterprise in the process of making Neo-pentecostalism a global force in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## KEYWORDS

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Globalization; Transnationalization; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God; Neopentecostalism; Contextualization.

## RESUMO

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Este artigo apresenta a “exportação” da Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus do Brasil para países em praticamente todos os continentes. São analisados casos de países onde a IURD é forte e países onde esse trabalho não logrou êxito. O pressuposto básico deste artigo é de que a IURD trabalha com contextualização nos países onde consegue entrada. Por razões diversas, não há uma chave única que consiga abrir as portas do sucesso dessa igreja em todos os países. Não obstante, apesar de alguns fracassos, pode ser

considerado um empreendimento bem-sucedido no processo de tornar o neopentecostalismo uma força global no início do século XXI.

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## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Globalização; Transnacionalização; Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus; Neopentecostalismo; Contextualização.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

To begin with, it is necessary to clarify what we do mean by “globalization”: what is it all about? The word globalization comes, of course, of “globe”, which has to do with the *Orbi* (or *oikos*) we human beings live in. Thus, “globalization” implies something related to the whole world.

The word is used in an economical way, with the meaning of the practices of Neo-liberal Capitalism in the world after the fall of the former Soviet Union and its consequent fragmentation. In this post-Cold War world, there is no more a bipolar economy. Rather, there is only the supremacy of the Capitalist model of economy, the very well known “Neo-Liberalism”. In this way, it is a one-way road, because it brings, with a few exceptions, the dominant countries of the rich “Global North” over the underdeveloped and developing countries of the so called “Global South” (IANNI, 1998; 2001; 2003; 2008).

The word may also has to do with the growth and development of mass media and telecommunications. Due to the development of the technology of telecommunications nowadays we do really live in a “global village”. Because of that it is commonly said that the world has become increasingly smaller. The definition of globalization that serves as the theoretical framework of this paper is that presented by the French scholars Badieu and Smoots, i.e.:

[...] toute relation qui, par volonté délibérée ou par destination, se construit dans l'espace mondial au-delà du cadre étatique national et qui se réalise en échappant au moins partiellement au contrôle ou à l'action médiatrice des États (BADIE; SMOOTS, 1992, p. 70).

According to this definition, a globalization movement is free somehow, because it is not tied to any government. Such a definition is perfect to be used as a theoretical lens through which one can see and analyze the transnationalization of the Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG, from now on, Universal Church or simply IURD<sup>1</sup>) in virtually all continents.

In this article the idea behind the word “globalization” is the one that makes something known in the whole world. To be more specific, the word globalization will be used of course in a religious way. And the point of this article is to show how the Brazilian mammoth IURD has work hard in order to become a “global” church. IURD is the first non-Catholic church that has become a true empire, present in many countries. Besides, as far as it is known, it is the first church of the Global South extremely successful in church planting in America, the British Isles and Western Europe.

## 2. THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD (IURD) – STATUS QUESTIONS

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Before we go on in order to achieve the point of this paper, there is a need to present a survey about IURD. Therefore, it will be possible to know what we are talking about. And this survey will be presented in a twofold way: first, some historical data about the IURD, and after rwards, something about the academic state of the art of the research about that church. The story of IURD is a very interesting one. There is already a plethora of academic studies related to this church (inter alia, JUSTINO, 1995; CAMPOS, 1997; DOZON; CORTEN; ORO, 2003; OLIVEIRA, 2004; FERRARI, 2007; ALMEIDA, 2009). For obvious reasons, many of the books used in order to prepare this paper are in Portuguese. Even though, there is an obvious linguistic barrier between many

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<sup>1</sup> This is the way the church is known and refered to in Brazil. Another way to make reference to the church in Brazil is using its Portuguese acronym – IURD (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus).

English-speaking American scholars and their Portuguese-speaking Brazilian fellow colleagues; this barrier is not impossible to overcome, not at all. Besides, I think this article can help to introduce some Brazilian scholarship to an American audience.

Notwithstanding, there is also a rich research concerning IURD which has been done in English. It is not surprising, if one considers the speedy of the growth IURD has experienced at least in the last 20, perhaps, 25 years. Prothero (2010, p. 90) states that “the fastest growing denomination in Latin America is the Brazil-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God”. In the same way of reasoning Demerath (2003, p. 5), in a deep and pervasive study about the relationship about religion and politics around the world observes that “the most talked about church in Brazil today is the highly aggressive Universal Church of the Kingdom of God”. What Demerath (2003) said eight years ago is somehow valid even nowadays<sup>2</sup>.

There are also a great number of theses and/or dissertations about IURD which were defended in outstanding Brazilian universities in graduate departments of Anthropology, History, Sociology, Psychology, Theory of Communication, Discourse Analysis, Semiotics, Religious Studies, Theology, and so on. These academic studies have been done by Catholic, Protestant, and even atheist scholars. And as far as a theoretical framework for such studies are concerned, they use classical authors, e.g., Karl Marx, Max Weber, Carl Gustav Jung, René Girard, Dominic Mainguenu, Peter Berger, Pierre Bourdieu, to name only a few. For instance, Rubim (1991) in a very creative and provocative way spoke about what she called “Theology of Oppression”. Silva (1992) examines the mechanical logic of conversion from a psychological perspective, comparing how it does happen in the Presbyterian (Mainline Protestant), Charismatic Catholic and IURD. As examples of very interesting academic approaches to IURD it is possible to quote, inter alia, Carneiro Campos (1995), Leal da Silva (1995),

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<sup>2</sup> Even though in the the last four or five years, the new Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus (something like *World Church of the Power of God*) has gained more and more attention in the Brazilian mass media. The “Igreja Mundial” (as it is commonly called in Brazil) is, until now, the only successfully split of the IURD.

Oliva (1995), Barros (1995), Almeida (1996), Oliveira (1998), Serafim da Silva (1998), Moreira (1998), Bonfatti (1998), Britto (1999), Tupinambá (1999), Souza (2000), Santos Oliva (2001), Ribeiro (2002), Cruz (2003).

### 3. IURD – A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

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Therefore, in this article there will be only a very brief presentation of the historical development of this church. It is a very recent enterprise, because the church was organized only in 1977. The founder and head of IURD is Edir Macedo Bezerra, who is nowadays known as Bishop Macedo, or simply Edir Macedo<sup>3</sup>. Macedo was born in Rio de Janeiro State, from a typical Brazilian family of Roman Catholic background, but with no practice at all of Christian faith in a traditional Catholic fashion. During his youth he became involved with Umbanda, a Brazilian folk religion that is a kind of syncretism of Catholicism and elements borrowed from some African traditional religions. Later he was converted to Evangelical Pentecostal faith due to the work of Bishop Robert (“Roberto”) McAlister, a Canadian Pentecostal missionary in Brazil, the founder of the Church of New Life (“Igreja de Nova Vida”), the very first charismatic church in Brazil which has made a “preferential option for the rich”. The Church of New Life was also the very first Brazilian charismatic church to adopt the Episcopal model of ecclesiastical administration. Macedo and his brother-in-law, R. R. Soares, started together a Pentecostal church in a very humble way in poor district of Rio de Janeiro, but eventually they disagreed with each other and that church was split. Each one followed his own way and both of them were very successful – Soares founded the International Church of the Grace of God (“Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus”) and Macedo, as it was already mentioned, founded IURD. Macedo was in

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<sup>3</sup> In order to find out details about Macedo’s life, see his authorized biography (TAVOLARO; LEMOS, 2007).

fact a true disciple of McAlister, because IURD also adopted the Episcopal model of ecclesiastical administration. Soares, by his turn, calls himself “only” *Missionary Soares*.

Paul Freston, a very well known Anglo-Brazilian sociologist of religion, popularized in Brazil the “theory of three waves” in order to present a kind of taxonomy of Pentecostalism (FRESTON, 1993, *passim*). According to this theory, IURD is a representative of the Third Wave of Pentecostalism in Brazil, which has as its main characteristic the fostering of the Theology of Prosperity (also called by some “Wealth and Health Gospel”) and a super emphasis in spiritual warfare and exorcism<sup>4</sup>.

In a few years IURD experienced a huge and almost unbelievable growth. And this not only in terms of numerical church growth, but in almost everything one can imagine. IURD and Edir Macedo are behind Record TV Network, which is nowadays a huge TV broadcasting system, second only to the mammoth Globo Network. Globo is a holding of several big enterprises, and there is since the early 1990s what has been called by the Brazilian press “Holy War” (*Guerra Santa*) – a war of audience and influence. This not so holy war has been observed by many studios of the religious phenomenon, including, *inter alia*, British scholar David Martin (2008, p. 16). But Macedo is in charge also of Rede Família and Rede Mulher (two smaller Brazilian TV networks), Line Records (a recorder of “Gospel” CDs and DVDs), at least 37 short wave radio stations, a weekly newspaper (*Folha Universal*), which is sold and/or given free of charge – its printing is of almost one million copies every week, and a huge printing complex, known as *Universal Produções*.

IURD is a “different” church, as far as doctrinal matters are concerned. Bishop Macedo, the head of the denomination, has declared in his authorized biography that he is in favor of abortion (TAVOLARO; LEMOS, 2007), a position that is condemned by Catholics, Mainline Protestants, tradi-

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<sup>4</sup> According to this theory, the First Wave of Pentecostalism in Brazil would be the so called “Classical Pentecostalism”, represented by the Assemblies of God, which has as its main characteristic the speaking in tongues; the Second Wave of Pentecostalism in Brazil has as its main characteristic the strong emphasis in divine healing and is represented by some Brazilian churches like *O Brasil para Cristo* (“Brazil for Christ”) and *Deus é Amor* (“God is Love”).

tional Evangelicals and Pentecostals alike. According to Burdick (2004, p. 75) IURD is now training female pastors, a position that is followed only by some churches of Mainline (“Liberal”) Protestantism in Brazil, e.g., the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession (IECLB) and the Methodist Church (IM), and by a very few Pentecostal churches, like the Foursquare Gospel Church. Besides, there is an identification with Brazilian folk religiosity, especially folk Catholicism and, even stronger, the aforementioned Umbanda and also the Candomblé<sup>5</sup>.

To many studios of the religious scenario in Brazil, what IURD does is syncretism, not only a contextualization of the identification with Brazilian folk culture<sup>6</sup>. But what is perhaps the worst charge against IURD and Macedo are those related to charlatanism as far as (divine) healing is concerned, and also swindle and malversation of the money of tithes and offerings of churchgoers and practitioners of that church. Under these charges, Macedo went to prison in May 24, 1992, but he was released soon after. All this indicate how IURD and his leader, Bishop Macedo, are highly controversial. Right now in Brazil it is announced that IURD is going to build a huge replica of Solomon’s temple in Sao Paulo, and it is said this temple will be the largest in the world.

## 4. THE WORLDWIDE PRESENCE OF IURD

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As it was aforementioned, IURD is, without a shadow of doubt, an example of success of the globalization of Brazilian Neo-pentecostalism. However, there are differences from country to country, as far as this “export of religious goods” is concerned. For instance, in Argentina, the powerful southern neighbor of Brazil, IURD is very successful. According to

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<sup>5</sup> *Candomblé* is a popular African traditional religion practiced in Brazil. Their followers claim that their religion is pure African and not a blend of religions like *Umbanda*.

<sup>6</sup> Conservative Evangelical missiologists feel themselves at home with contextualization, but are always at odds with the idea of syncretism. As far as the conservative Evangelical perspective on contextualization see, inter alia, Nichols (1979).



Seman (2003) in the Christmas of 2001 IURD assembled a meeting of about 45,000 people in a soccer stadium in Buenos Aires (Argentinean people are so fanatic about soccer as the Brazilians!).

There are also radio and TV programs of IURD that are broadcasted all over the country, and a weekly newspaper in Spanish. Portugal is another of chapter success of IURD. There is the obvious aspect of the same language spoken in both countries, which facilitates the communication with Portuguese people. In Portugal IURD has preached the same “Wealth and Health” Gospel it has preached in Brazil. According to Anglo-Brazilian sociologist Paul Freston (2001, p. 196-215), a leading scholar in the growth and spread of Pentecostalism around the world, the beginning of IURD in Portugal coincides with the entry of that country in the European Union. As some portions of the Portuguese population were not able to achieve the desired socio-economical status of the new condition of the country, they approached IURD, in order to get that status by a “magic” solution. Anyway, in spite of some scandals (the Portuguese press has done in Portugal some denouncements against IURD, just as it has happened in Brazil, due to scandals relating to financial matters) Portugal is the most successful example of the presence of IURD in Europe<sup>7</sup>.

Now it is time to turn our attention to the African continent. To South Africa, to be more specific. IURD is present in South Africa since 1993, in the post-*Apartheid* period. The church started its activities with immigrants who came from Angola and Mozambique. That was the moment when ethnic *Apartheid* was over, but not the social and economical one. This was a big “open door” for IURD to preach the Theology of Prosperity Gospel. Besides, the tradicional African mindset, absolutely open to the invisible “spiritual” world was an open door as well for the message of spiritual warfare of IURD. Nowadays there is a huge “Cathedral of Faith”<sup>8</sup> in Soweto, Johannesburg. In 2007 IURD was present in South African

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<sup>7</sup> As far as the experience of IURD in Portugal, see, inter alia, Mafra (2003, p. 165-176).

<sup>8</sup> The big temples of IURD are called in Brazil and all over the world “Cathedral of Faith” (*Catedral da Fé* in Portuguese).

newspapers, due to a highly controversial action: the distribution, free of charge, of condoms specially to black men, in order to avoid the pandemic of HIV/AIDS in that country.

If Argentina, Portugal and South Africa are histories of success of IURD abroad, the same cannot be said about its presence in other countries, e.g., Uruguay. It is ironic that Uruguay and Argentina share much in common, the same Spanish cultural tradition. Nevertheless, in Uruguay IURD does not have even a bit of the success it has in Argentina. It is not surprising, due to the fact Uruguay is very well known as the most secularized country in Latin America. Brazilian scholar Ari Pedro Oro tells about a visit he made to Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay, in 1998, when he went to the headquarter of IURD in that *gaucho* country, at Fernandez Crespo Street, and he observed that only a few people were attending to the services. Around that temple there were five *Santerias*, that is, places where one can buy products of Afro-Brazilian religions (that is a kind of contradiction, or perhaps, one of the many enigmas of religion: Uruguay is a country of Catholic tradition, it is very secularized, as it was aforementioned, but Afro-Brazilian religions are very popular in the country). The Brazilian pastor said to the scholar: “the demon is very strong over here, so, because of that, our church is not able to prosper...” (ORO, 2004, p. 147). This is another huge contradiction: “spiritual warfare” has been practically the very basis of IURD over the years. However, in Uruguay it has not been successful in this same field.

Mexico is another Latin American country where IURD is not so strong. It is interesting to observe that the church changes its name in some countries. Both in Mexico and Colombia for instance, IURD is called *Oración Fuerte al Espíritu Santo* (Spanish for “Strong Prayer to the Holy Spirit”)⁹. In Mexico IURD faces problems with the Mexican legislation (Mexico, in spite of the violent anti-Catholic Republicanism that was imposed in the country when it gained its inde-

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⁹ Another example is IURD in Switzerland. In May 2009, the author of this article had been to Geneva in order to present a paper in an academic conference. There, he visited the *Centre D'accueil Universel de Genève* (Universal Center for Spiritual Reception) and met the couple who is in charge of the church in that city: a Portuguese pastor and his Brazilian wife. The work of IURD in Geneva, by the way, is not so big nor strong.

pendence from Spain, has a long history of a legislation that is by and large closed to Protestantism) and with folk culture, which is strongly influenced by the worship to *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (Spanish for “Our Lady of Guadalupe”), the Patron Saint of the Americas. In Mexico, until now, IURD has not succeeded in assimilate to the folk Catholic culture, as it has done in the “motherland” of Brazil. But the Universal *Oración Fuerte al Espíritu Santo* Church in Mexico has its own version of the Portuguese motto: *Pare de Sofrir* (“Stop Suffering”).

In other countries, like, e.g., France, IURD is facing an eclipse: according to Aubrée (2003, p. 195), the church is declining in France.

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## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even though there are other Brazilian religious phenomena scattered all over the world (specially Afro-Brazilian cults and, perhaps in a lesser extent, the *Ayuaasca* cults (*Santo Daimé* is the most well known), in the last two decades or so IURD is growing fast in some countries, growing not so fast in other, but it is present in more than 40 countries. IURD, with their successes and failures, is a very interesting case study of cultural adaptation and contextualization. By one side, IURD is helping to “reverse the tide”: for centuries Brazil was a country that received foreign missionaries, but now Brazil is sending missionaries... In some cases Brazilians living abroad are ashamed of their fellow countrymen of IURD, because this church is so controversial. But it is undeniable that IURD is helping to make Neo-pentecostalism a strong force in the religious world scenario.

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