An evening with Edir Macedo at his Templo de Salomão.

People began to file in to the Templo at 3 p.m. for a service (reunião) which began at 6. They came from many parts of Brazil in coachloads and I met groups from New Zealand, South Africa and Colombia. The NZ and SA groups were accompanied by young Brazilian pastors who were working in those countries. It was noticeable that the New Zealand group were mostly composed of indigenous or partly indigenous people and also I think of black immigrants from Africa. One of them said he and his wide were Cook islanders, but living in New Zealand. The Colombians were from Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast and had been contributing to the construction of the Templo – called a ‘sanctuary’ by Bispo Macedo while he presided over the service.

Many people were dressed in their best clothes. Church officials of various kinds were very much in evidence, especially as security personnel, as dark-suited individuals shepherding people around, and many men in dark grey suits and red ties carried a nifty shopping bag from up-market tailor [Camargo](http://camargoalfaiataria.com.br/) – it looked as if they had all received some sort of standard gift from the Church. But I could not or dared not ask – the atmosphere around these people, even when they are in a restaurant, is hermetic. They huddle together in what to me looks like uneasy and competitive fraternity. (But that is just what it looks like to me.) They formed a significant proportion of the clientele at the self-service restaurant which has recently had a facelift (and price lift) as well and has renamed itself ‘Skina do Templo’ – ‘Temple Corner’, spelt colloquially as ‘Skina’ rather than ‘Esquina’.

There was a great deal of apparently frantic activity around the precincts, I think because tomorrow is the formal opening when the President and many other authorities will be in attendance. Trees being shifted around, paving being laid by dozens of workers in blue overalls.

Most Brazilian visitors have come in groups by coach: I spoke to people from Belo Horizonte and Curitiba who were returning the same day – which means getting home well after midnight because the service only finished at 7.45. (To illustrate the impoverished reporting of these matters in the press, the big news a few days ago was that the followers of the church were obliged to arrive by coach and pay $20 to the church for the privilege. This was not true: I came by public transport and on foot, but of course people coming long distances will have come in organized tours. So what?)

Security was airport standard: everyone went through a metal detector and no cameras or cellphones were permitted. A drone resembling a miniature moon landing craft and sounding like a hornet hovered ten metres above the queue and then flew away. There must have been at least a thousand security and shepherding personnel on hand. The newspapers next morning noticed that and the related oppressive security atmosphere – in fact that is about all they did notice. But the visitors, overwhelmingly church followers, were not at all bothered by the security: only myself and the reporters who want to take pictures and recordings felt constrained. For the visitors, presumably, the security is for their benefit.

The complete and effective prohibition of electronic equipment means that I have no visual aids or recordings to complement this description of the interior, and for the time being the Church has not published depictions or pictures of the main interior space on any of its websites. (The only interior views are of meeting rooms and salons which look like VIP lounges in an airport.) The online videos of the opening ceremony show only narrowly focused images of Macedo himself and views of the congregation taken from high above. Important artefacts and symbols do not appear.

Once through security visitors walk towards the main entrance and are welcomed by attendants in white robes with gold sashes, known as ‘Levitas’ (Levites). They are slightly older than the average church worker (*obreiro*) and whereas the latter are overwhelmingly male the Levites are equally male and female.

The Templo’s frontage measures 106 metres and its height 56 metres Inside the main hall is 18 metres high and can seat 10,000 people, and although at the back there were quite a few empty seats I suspect that there were more than 8,000, maybe more than 9,000 there tonight. Most queued early and sat quietly for two or three hours waiting for proceedings to start. Facing them a vast white gauze curtain concealed the stage or podium flanked by enormous screens showing alternating views of gentle mountain streams and of wind-eroded desert landscapes, archaeological sites and scriptural quotations. Periodically a soothing female voice interrupted the mood music, featuring much ‘cello, asking people to sit in a ‘spirit of prayer’, to not move around the hall, and wait quietly for the meeting to begin. Hardly anyone had a prayer book or Bible. They sat still, rapt. The size and height of the hall is itself enough to induce silence. The side walls have 6 recessed panels each containing a seven-branched *menorah* (candlestick) 4.5 metres high and weighing 250 kg., whose yellow hidden bulbs are designed to flicker gently, like candles.

Like in other large Universal Church venues, the seating is set out as in a cinema, but here it is very high quality: the architect told me it was brought from Spain. The lighting is impressively deep background. 49 square lighting panels each measuring 49 square metres and taken together their small LED bulbs number 10,000 in all. Again according to the architect, guilded aluminium in the panels (which he called ‘Luminaria’) were been designed to create a golden penumbra of light even while the rays emit near-white light. I cannot tell if this effect has been achieved.

The visitors – they are not yet a congregation, but they will become one when Macedo appears - faced a podium with a section of the Ark of the Covenant beneath two enormous winged-angels built against the rear wall. The entire structure, which must measure three metres in height or more, is gilded. Entrance doors to the ‘back of stage’ open up within it. I say ‘back of stage’ with reason: it is a common feature of the more imposing Universal Church buildings that pastors emerge from back of stage rather than walking up to the podium – which they call an altar – from the front. The doors at the sides of the building and the front are similarly gilded and embossed with relief work.

Above the altar are inscribed in enormous letters the words ‘Santidade do Senhor’ – Holiness of God – which might not be worthy of comment but for the fact that the lettering is shaped so that it reflects, imitates and in some cases copies Hebrew letters: thus the ‘r’ at the end of the phrase is a Hebrew ‘gimel’, the letter ‘d’ is an upside-down ‘final kaf’ and ‘o’ seems to be a ‘samech’. Other Jewish echoes include a miniature Torah scroll on a table on the podium and a candelabra which according to Macedo’s words at the opening [ceremony](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-gEmbnnOQs) –250,000 views on Youtube in 11 days - reproduces the word Yeshua,. This is Hebrew for Jesus, or at least the Hebrew equivalent used by evangelicals and messianic Jews.

Eventually, the man himself appears, his tallit held together by a silver clasp and wearing a sizeable black velvet *kippa* with a blue border – as in the video of the opening ceremony. He has grown a beard in recent months perhaps to make himself look Rabbinical or prophet-like.

Macedo does not just preside: he leads, he is the only person to speak, and he also leads the singing. He is entirely at ease with himself, shifting between a friendly, avuncular style and the rhetoric of moral exhortation and salvation with consummate ease. He is a tiny, remote figure on the podium in this vast hall, but the large screens to either side of the podium show him in complete command of the hall and also his church workers.

The meeting (‘reunião’ is the voiceover’s word) follows many standard features of this church’s services. He leads the singing. The congregation, who are predominantly though by no means exclusively young people age less than 40, know the songs from memory, but to make sure the leader gives a prompt between lines, as again is common the Universal Church. The following account is based on my memory and on written notes taken during the event.

As in most Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches there is no manifest liturgical sequence. The congregation stand and sit and sing or incant as instructed. Macedo tells us that ‘God brought you here not to see the templo but to ‘resolver a sua vida’, to ‘sort out the problems in your life’.

The prayers and imprecations are soft and sometimes almost tearful. He does not recite the Lord’s Prayer or any other standard text, but rather follows his line of thought. Who is he addressing? I think he is addressing each one of us individually and our relationship with our selves. The problems we have in our life are things we can overcome on our own and in communion with God, by adopting an attitude of acceptance. God wants each of us to be happy, and at peace with ourselves and our friends and relations and colleagues, but God cannot precisely make us happy.

I know from many years of observing this church that people speak of it as a place which provides them with support, which operates some sort of transformation in their lives, but the Church’s visible and audible message is not exactly that: it t is true

He invites members of the congregation to come to the front, between the seating and the podium, and many do so. There he tells them:

If we have something weighing on our conscience we should think about it. Our conscience is the ‘balança de nossa comunhão com Deus’, it functions as the ‘scales of our communion with God’. If you have a grudge against someone – forgive them (‘se tem algo contra alguem, perdoa essa pessoa’) and when you return to your seat you will be free of this weight. If you do not forgive you will not be forgiven.

The metaphor is obscure – but certainly original. Likewise another metaphor when he speaks of the medium of exchange between ourselves and God – just as the Americans have the dollar, the Brazilians the real and the Europeans the euro so we have faith as the medium of exchange with God, and we pay by obeying him. Obedience is how God ‘charges’ us: ‘Judge not that …’ he waits for the congregation to complete the phrase… ‘ye be not judged’ (Matthew 7:1).

‘A fé e algo prático.. . se você não entregar a sua vida não ha salvação ’

Faith is a practical matter: if you do not give your life to God there will be no salvation’

And then he explains:

‘Para tomar posse do que voce quer… imagine-se no Shopping celestial’ …

(to gain hold of what you desire… imagine you are in the celestial Shopping Centre’… you pay with obedience. If the Bible is to be summed up in one word it is that: Obedience!

And then we come to the offerings: he calls on people to take a thread of hair and put it, together with their donation, in an envelope… to give what they did not think they could ever give (o que você não esperava dar)…(this is a common theme in this church) and make a bet (apostar)…; In return you will get real results, not ‘bla bla bla’… Tem que haver uma diferença (this has to make a difference).

We walk to the front with our envelopes and put them in the slits of one of the letter-boxes set inside the low wall at the front of the podium. As this procedure rolls on a South African choir dressed in colourful uniform sings hymns. Macedo thanks them and tells how beautiful a country South Africa is .

And then a few minutes later there is a second call, for envelopes to be placed in red velvet bags emblazoned with a Menorah (seven-branched candlestick) held by ‘Levitas’ positioned in the aisles.

Towards the end the lights are dimmed and on the big screens Macedo’s face is lit up. I will not offer an interpretation of this. Then the lights come on again and he ends with the following metaphor: God fills us, ‘nos engravidamos de ti’ – We are pregnant with you!’ – or perhaps ‘We have been impregnated with you’ or even ‘We have been impregnated by you’.

In a final change of register he explains to us gently how we must leave the place in an orderly manner: discipline! A family, a business, has to have discipline and the same applies to a church and to the faithful. The devil is disorder and chaos. He repeats: discipline, discipline….

As I leave I talk to the young couple next to me who had been holding each others’ hands throughout the service. They seemed barely 20 years old and were studying or maybe still in school. They had come in a group from Belo Horizonte, 6 hours’ bus ride away During the service she would tilt her head on to his shoulder. They had also made a donation of perhaps 20 Reais. They have been together for some time: she is a church member, but he is not. For them it was a perfect day.

Is there still a Christian frame?

It has been pointed out to me by readers of a draft of this text that I was perhaps over-impressed by the Jewish symbols and motifs built into the building and into Macedo’s own self-presentation. That is probably true, especially since those elements are somewhat random, or arbitrary – that is to say, they do not fit together in a meaning system or as references to a Jewish liturgy or identity. If Macedo were to read from the Torah scroll and pray in Hebrew, if he were to follow some sort of liturgy derived from a Jewish prayer book, if he were to follow the Jewish calendar a little – all practices adopted by Messianic congregations to different degrees in Brazil and elsewhere – then he might be described as at least a little Jewish – that is, one might say that he takes Judaism seriously. But instead the fragmentary character of the borrowings and the absence of any language referring to Judaism or Jewish texts makes borrowings of bits and pieces appear more like decoration than signals of a commitment. However, I would not dismiss them as frivolous or without purpose: Macedo’s record shows that things which appear outlandish at first later come to form part of a strategy – as in his aggressive pressure on followers to donate (even while saying this is not an obligation) or his purchase in the early 1990s, of a bankrupt TV network which has since become Brazil’s third biggest.

The Christian aspect of the meeting was more in its atmosphere than in anything tangible: people came in and sat down quietly in rows as in church. Asked to remain seated and quiet for three hours they obeyed. They all faced a podium which the church itself (and it is still the Universal *Church* of the Kingdom of God) calls an ‘altar’ although they practice none of the accompanying rituals of an altar like dedicating the blood and flesh of Christ in holy communion.. They did not follow a prayer book of any kind but sang along with songs they knew by heart. Only very few had Bibles. They did not recite prayers but rather in the manner of evangelical churches uttered short but emphatic imprecations and implored God or Jesus to come to their help or accept their thanks for the blessings they receive. There was a certain amount of arm-waving and arm-raising with outstretched hands as is common in evangelical services, but it was relatively low-key in keeping with the solemnity imposed by the grandiose hall and its high ceiling.

‘Biblical’ or ‘Jewish’?

So the performative dimension, the management of the body, was distinctly Christian and evangelical, while what at first appeared as a Jewish dimension could also be described as more Biblical than Jewish – reinforced by the ‘Levites’ in their white robes and gold waistbands. In addition the subsequent report on Macedo’s own TV Record (Brazil’s no. 3 television network) of the ‘political’ inauguration attended by the President, prominent representatives of every political party, the Presidents of the Supreme Court and of the Supreme Military Tribunal, and innumerable other dignitaries and celebrities, showed her being guided around the Temple Museum by a man dressed as the High Priest complete with breastplate as depicted in a model which can be found in the Temple Institute in Jerusalem – that is, according to the specifications in the Book of Exodus xxviii. 13-30 and xxxix. 8-21.

Note on press coverage:

I should finish by considering the treatment of this event and the phenomenon behind it in the Brazilian media. I should say first that the Universal Church’s officials – all called pastors and bishops - are utterly paranoid and have been trained and socialized over more than twenty years to control obsessively the leakage of any information. I say ‘leakage’ because they regard any publication which is not under their control as a risk. (It took me a year to get an interview with the temple architect.) In 1991 when I started going to their churches in Salvador I quickly learnt not to take a notebook: at that time they were the subject of a campaign emanating from the Globo media empire accusing them using laundered drugs money to buy TV Record – today owned by Macedo and the second network in the country. This may have been the start of a bad relationship with the (other) media, but in addition there seems to be more than that to account for the condescension and narrow focus of reporting of the Universal Church. Thus the reporting of the inauguration, which is a thirty-day rolling event, attracting thousands every day, is limited to the controversy over whether the church obtained proper building permit (it may well not have done) and to the fierce security arrangements. Often also the reporting is built on rumours to discredit the Church - the most recent one being that it was only possible to arrive if one paid the coach fee mentioned above. In short, newspaper reporters in Brazil’s main newspapers are mostly interested only in the Church as a business and as a power base. The reporters do not comment on what might bring these thousands of followers to this place; they treat them as blindly obedient to the church and its leader and as naïve contributors to its coffers. They do not see that, for better or for worse, they are a significant part of Brazilian society and one which the media should be thinking about. And the church for its part encourages such attitudes by its secretiveness, which is remarkable for an organization with millions of followers across the world.