Hope and Religion

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*Introduction*

Hope, like its twin, despair, is obviously an enduring and pervasive human emotion, and one common feature of religion in its innumerable forms is that it is sought by people in search of hope and of relief from despair. But the management of the supernatural does not stand still, and I will argue in the following pages that by examining some of the ways in which religion responds to despair and provides hope we can learn about how religion is changing in quite fundamental ways.

The Abrahamic religions, it is argued, offer a solace which is intangible, unknowable and distant, and in that they stand in contrast to the thaumaturgic and the shamanistic which offer remedies that are uncertain, but knowable. Both display elaborate ritual procedures, but the Abrahamic religions clearly want to mark themselves out at least in their official versions: shamans do not have ‘official versions’. But, as is well known, this contrast, based on the Abrahamic religions’ theological or Rabbinic traditions[[1]](#footnote-1), sets aside the Abrahamic religions’ rich and ancient undergrowth of popular religion. The thesis of the paper is that popular religion exists in a dialectic relationship with institutionalized official religion, that it embodies a sense of tradition, but of a living tradition, and that like shamanic ritual it offers solace and occasionally healing. Examples drawn are mostly Catholic and Jewish. This dialectic relationship between the official and the unofficial, the erudite and the popular, is one of mutual interdependence. It is not destructive.

Obviously this model is presented not as a summary of thousands of years of civilization, but as background to an interpretation of the ways in which contemporary charismatic movements are changing the location and the meaning of religion in Latin America in particular, but by extension throughout Western Christianity.

The paper tracks the transformation of the erudite-popular relationship as it is transformed and dissolved by contemporary charismatic movements, by Pentecostalism and especially neo-Pentecostalism, in an evolution which I describe as the secularization of religious reason - tendency shared also by non-charismatic movements such as the Theology of Liberation, bearers of a project profoundly different from the charismatic. The interpretation relies on the idea of exchange with the supernatural, of institutionalization and of the trust which institutionalization is designed to instill and maintain – exchange, therefore, which is variously mediated by a lone shaman, by a hierarchical institution, directly as in popular religion, or with the institution itself as in Pentecostalism. When the exchange is with the institution itself religion has somehow been remade and relocated. Popular religion is discarded with the heritage or tradition which sustains it; erudite religion is discarded because doctrine and theology are despised; but the state is still expected to grant to this sort of religion the same kind of exemptions and privileges which it grants to institutionalized religions.

*The supernatural, ritual and uncertainty*

Despite the apparently enormous variation of what goes, somewhat intuitively, by the name of religion, and despite the statement by Maurice Bloch that anthropologists have found it impossible ‘ to ... isolate or define... religion’ ([Bloch 2008](#_ENREF_9)). I think that cognitive anthropologists and psychologists have demonstrated that a common core does exist. The cognitivists are dealing not with institutionalized religion but rather with how we invoke and mobilize the supernatural or how the supernatural is built into our evolution. This is manifested in popular religion, not in institutionalized religion. Popular religion does have common features across cultures and through time, because of its deep involvement with curing or preventing illness, with warning of and warding off rumour and gossip, with divining and controlling the future and with life after death. Cognitive psychology , as applied to religion in the work of Boyer and Atran ([Boyer 2001](#_ENREF_10); [Atran 2003](#_ENREF_3); [Boyer 2004](#_ENREF_11); [Lehmann 2005](#_ENREF_30)) tells us that these accounts rely on several evolved modes of operation of the brain: one is the inclination to search for agency in explaining obscure and disconcerting phenomena: this is essential to enable us to survive but it can also be excessive, as in paranoia. Alertness to danger/risk which leads us to associate strange or threatening noises and visions with agents like ghosts or with a warning from a supernatural godlike agent. The need to know what is going on in other people’s minds – as in the ‘theory of mind’ which to varying degrees is recognised to be lacking in autistic individuals ([Baron-Cohen 1995](#_ENREF_4)) - is also an essential feature of human interaction which leads us to look for all-knowing entities like an omniscient God or, in more everyday terms, to consult a shaman or witch who has privileged knowledge and offers to diagnose plots against us and to provide weapons to counter them. Risk plus uncertainty plus information combine with plausible advice in areas where certainty is not available. (The shaman is powerful because since everyone consults him he has privileged information and may provide the right advice. The trouble is that one cannot always trust the shaman to be impartial, and we shall see that this issue of trust is important to the demarcation of institutionalized religion in the Abrahamic traditions.)

The cognitivists do not claim that the bundle of ideas and behaviours we intuitively describe and package as ‘religion’ make a coherent or homogeneous whole; rather in Atran’s words, religion as we know it encompasses ‘a variety of cognitive and affective systems, some with separate evolutionary histories, and some with no evolutionary history to speak of. Of those with an evolutionary history, some parts plausibly have an adaptive story, while others are more likely by-products.’ ([Atran 2003: 265](#_ENREF_3)). The line between features with an ‘original’ adaptive function and others which are ‘exaptations’, by-products, is somewhat notional, but for our purposes the point is that they have come to form common underlying features of the popular religion which is at the heart of all religion, despite the diversity of its institutional forms across time and space.

Dealing with the uncertainties of gossip, illness and death requires experts and specialists, and so individuals carve out or inherit acquire expert roles with esoteric knowledge and access to the supernatural realm. But there has to be some sort of ‘system’ for building trust in individuals who help us to cope with uncertainty, who cure illness and who manage the transition from life to death and communication with the dead, even while also protecting us from confidence tricksters. And so we must add ritual and exchange to these psychological propensities to look for solutions. Ritual institutionalizes or essentializes a practice, marking it as standard procedure but also introducing extensive elements which are not present for any practical reason related to the context, but fix social roles in relation to the procedure: ritual should induce trust and it also should confer privileged knowledge on the part of the person performing it. Exchange is deeply embedded in our evolved psychology from the exchange of glances in recognition, to sex, to economics, and guilt – the guilt we experience when we do not fulfil the obligations of reciprocity. In our relationship with the supernatural the exchange is also ritualized so that the successes of the past can be repeated and the failures explained. In explaining how religion – which has ritual as an indispensable component - manages hope and hopelessness, ritual and exchange are intimately connected. Such ritual exchanges depend on the meticulous fulfilment of esoteric procedures, yet they remain bedevilled by uncertainty – and the word ‘bedevilled’ is probably appropriate in this context. In Dan Sperber’s words: ‘only misfortune always begs for an explanation’: if things go fine then questions are not asked. But ‘when failure to adhere to the practice is followed by misfortune, it may appear to have caused it’ ([Sperber 1996: 51-52](#_ENREF_43)). Sperber’s formulation includes the words ‘*strict* adherence’ (my emphasis) reflecting the ritual character of these procedures, and that is in turn related to the belief in their efficacy. They do not claim to be one hundred per cent successful, but that is not the point: the point is that (a) if you haven’t performed the ritual and the misfortune arises you could be held responsible; (b) that it ties people in to a social network of responsibility who might hold you responsible or, alternatively, forgive you – or indeed be grateful if the ritual is perceived to have had the desired effect, and (c) it allows for mistakes to explain failure. So long as you have performed the ritual, the system is set up so that even if it does not achieve the desired or anticipated outcome you will not be held to account.

The ritual distributes roles, thus evoking reciprocity in others, be they those who suffer the misfortune directly or those who are linked to the sufferers. It also creates a set of idealized, ‘essentialized’ figures ([Bloch 2008](#_ENREF_9)) who act in the name of supernatural powers and incur costs on their own behalf (the accoutrements of ritual, renunciation of their daily needs) but attract donations, reciprocity, from those who stand to benefit from their renunciation. The stricter the requirements of the ritual the higher the cost, but as the ritual becomes more costly so more participants are required and more people can join in support. If the central figure is a celebrity , enjoys a cult of personality, then people may be prepared to pay a higher cost, even pay with their lives, but more usually the cost is low because of the uncertain outcome, balanced by the comfort of shared reciprocity.

In a ritual involving exchange with a supernatural agent there is always an intermediary: a medium, or an institution – the Church. These exchanges have to be public: just as a Pentecostal cannot claim to have received the Holy Spirit in private, a vision of the Virgin Mary is of no value if it is not recognised, and an exorcism, for example has to be witnessed.

In non-institutionalized religious cultures the intermediary wields real, sometimes frightening power. Geschiere ([Geschiere 1995](#_ENREF_20)) describes the sorcerers and witch-hunters who are indispensable associates of Cameroonian politicians: the mystery surrounding them is whether they are themselves responsible for the possession which they diagnose. Likewise neo-Pentecostal churches (of which more later) practice exorcism to help their followers recapture a lover or expel drugs from their households: if it doesn’t work then the sufferer is told that the procedure had a defect or the exorcist him/herself was possessed or was an agent of diabolical forces, or the sufferer has not tried hard enough. There is always an answer and reassessments go round and round in a never-ending circle. So paranoia is fed, but so also social actors in the long run have an incentive to try to create trust and institutions.

It is precisely the uncertain efficacy of these procedures that cultivates their ritual character – the ‘strict adherence’ in Sperber’s formulation. The managers of the supernatural in non-institutionalized religious possession cults, manage a relationship of exchange between their devotees and the supernatural and between themselves and their adepts, keeping initiation for themselves, thanks again to elaborate esoteric rituals. And so this sort of religion handles, manipulates and perpetuates the hope and hopelessness of individuals. It was classically described by Evans-Pritchard for the Zande, though he studiously avoids mentioning emotions such as hopelessness at all: for the Zande, in his account, witchcraft is an everyday matter of social and physical explanation. But the ambiguity is patently present, as when he describes how oracles may lie – and how everyone knows that they are lying – in circumstances when to do otherwise would create social tension ([Evans-Pritchard 1965: 77](#_ENREF_17)). A similar pattern appears in Joel Robbins’ account of the conversion and subsequent religious life of a tiny community in Papua New Guinea – the Urapmin – who had converted en masse to evangelical Christianity. The Urapmin declared innumerable sins in extended and very frequent public meetings in their church building, but these were mostly trivialities. When a transgression was serious and affected the stability of their own social relationships, for example an extra-marital affair, then they waited for it to pass or the personal conflict to be resolved before confessing it ([Robbins 2004: 276](#_ENREF_39)).

*The Hereafter and its rewards*

In contrast to ‘non-institutionalized’ religions, Abrahamic religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam provide a soteriology, an eschatology, a narrative about life and death, a set of abstract principles for living one’s life, and an ethos. These religions offer hope to the hopeless in different ways, and on a far, far grander scale than shamans and possession cults. Instead of a cure for your stomach pains or revenge on your enemies, they offer unlimited happiness and prosperity for generation after generation, and for eternity. And how does one earn this bounty? Not by making ever greater donations, nor by upping the stakes in reciprocity, but just by obeying commands, and following laws. Not only is none of this claimed to benefit the supernatural source of this authority, but even the benefits for the faithful and the followers are only for a distant future – for future generations in ‘the land that I have given you’ when the ‘you’ will long be dead (like Moses) or in the life hereafter when we will be saved.

And what of the punishments for the disobedience of a stiff-necked people?

In the Book of Deuteronomy Chapter 28 has 68 verses, of which 14 tell of the wonderful blessings which will come upon the people if they diligently observe all God’s commandments. But the rest of the chapter lists curses and misfortunes so shocking and frightening that when they are reached in the annual cycle of Torah readings in the synagogue they are not chanted but hurriedly recited in a low voice.

In the works of the Old Testament Prophets, when the children of Israel suffer, it is *their* fault, *they* have brought it upon themselves by abandoning the laws, as in the Book of Lamentations, written after the Babylonians had laid waste to Jerusalem, in which the theme is the punishment by God of the people who disobeyed or forsook his laws, ending with the hope that the Lord will turn his people ‘back to thyself’, that they will return to him. The Babylonians are not mentioned: they are the mere instruments of God's wrath against his disobedient people.

Neither the Prophet Jeremiah, presumed author of Lamentations, nor the other Old Testament Prophets, needed a magician to convince themselves, or to convince their followers. When misfortune struck the explanation was not individual and the remedy did not lie in ritual or charms or esoteric remedies, or in casting of a curse on an enemy. The explanation was moral: the people had transgressed and God was punishing them. The remedy was in God’s hands alone.

But this is not of course the whole story, for there can be no supernatural agency without supernatural intervention in human interaction – that is, without magic, and one should not forget that Israel’s austere lawgiving God was not above proving his superiority by performing very earthly miracles, especially in enabling his people to triumph over their enemies and discrediting the priests who served rival gods[[2]](#footnote-2). But the idea of a covenant, a contract, with a whole people, to ensure their future, rather than ongoing endless wheeling and dealing on an individual basis, does set the God of the Old Testament apart. And the curious thing is that, in exchange for these long term unknowable benefits this tradition demands much more costly sacrifice – not donations, not trinkets or offerings, but moral sacrifices, obedience and ritual sacrifices of animals. The only immediate benefit was a negative one: tio be spared the punishments.

Old Testament Judaism lays down a legal system for a people as a whole, underpinned by the contract/covenant. Christianity, in contrast, provides individual salvation in the next world, so that we can never know for sure if we will be rewarded for good behaviour. This, again, is not a God who can be appeased by offering sacrifices and exchanges, or at least not officially. It is a God who died so we might all be saved, whose grace is free and unconditional, yet whose followers established a vast apparatus which has lasted 2000 years, which has regulated the lives of millions, which developed elaborate visions of hell and eternal damnation and role models of self-sacrifice in monks, and martyrs, in people who abstain from sex, from normal social intercourse and so on. Far from exchanges with supernatural entities, certain strands of Christianity seem to be telling us ‘the more you sacrifice the less you will be rewarded in this life’ – sacrifices embodied in a hierarchy of abstinences from ‘no sex before marriage’ for lay people to total silence and withdrawal from the world for Trappist monks. But at the same time they create institutions which enable the rest of us to benefit from their sacrifice – a feature which, as Danièle Hervieu-Léger has explained, is central to the Catholic heritage and which stands in stark contrast to the evangelical churches which we shall discuss later ([Hervieu-Léger 2001: 141](#_ENREF_24)).

*The dialectic of the popular and the erudite*

That, however, is far from the whole story, for side by side with the ethos of abnegation and sacrifice Christianity exhibits an intricate dialectic of popular and official religious practices. If the exchanges managed in official rituals are extremely opaque for individuals, popular religion amply compensates. The promise of salvation is hard to sell to individuals, but the rites which are attached to it (viz. Holy Communion, baptism, fiestas, saying the rosary etc.) and communal activities like maintenance of church buildings and servicing its many activities and charitable works both create multiple mechanisms of common identity among the faithful and also reward contributions of time and energy with status, respect and the pleasure and pride of collaborating with a great institution.

Thanks to popular religion the Church has been able to go well beyond (or below) the austere mission of saving souls and focusing on the after-life. It sponsors, maybe oversees, but rarely directly manages pilgrimages and local fiestas, it welcomes prayer groups in its churches, celebrating and venerating local saints, Corpus Christi and the like, but with some notable exceptions (see below) leaves all these to be self-managed by the laity and sometimes the organizations in charge have large memberships and substantial resources – like the fraternities (*cofradias* in Spanish) which manage fiestas ([Molinié 2004](#_ENREF_38); [Brandão 2007: 55](#_ENREF_12)).

Of particular interest to us are activities and rituals which are a response to hopelessness or which provide hope. In Catholicism these follow the pattern of exchange: votos and ex-votos, and pilgrimages. But there is sometimes complicated negotiation with the hierarchy, as at Lourdes where a young girl’s story about ‘that thing’ (*acqueyro* in the local dialect) she had seen in a grotto in the Pyrenees developed into a worldwide cult ([Harris 1999](#_ENREF_23)). On the one hand the French bishops and the opponents of anti-clericalism seized upon the incident to transform this obscure village into a world centre for divine healing. But on the other the hierarchy has gone to great lengths to maintain control during the 150 years since Bernadette’s vision, establishing an office to certify miracles and setting such a high standard that in 2006 a bishop called for it to be relaxed in the light of competition from Pentecostals and their healing industry (*Le Monde*, 25-3-2006). [[3]](#footnote-3)

A similar pattern developed around Padre Pio, a Franciscan friar in a tiny convent in the Southern Italian village of San Giovanni Rotondo (Puglia): after he received the stigmata in 1918 a cult grew up around him attracting pilgrims from all over Southern Italy who came to attend his celebrations of Mass, which tended to last for many hours ([Luzzatto 2007](#_ENREF_35)). But for decades the Vatican remained sceptical, sending inquisitorial missions to the monastery and subjecting the friar to periods of withdrawal when he could neither say Mass nor preach nor hear confession – the three activities for which he was most sought after. All sorts of political and even financial scandals arose in the little village, especially during and after World War II when it became the beneficiary of the combined support of the Christian Democratic party and Marshall Plan assistance – both interested in countering the strong influence of the Communist Party in Southern Italy at that time ([Tarrow 1967](#_ENREF_44)). This patronage led to the construction of a very large hospital which continues to function. The friar was meticulously obedient and orthodox: he never said anything controversial apart from the claim to have received the stigmata – whose lesions have indeed been documented, though of course their cause remains forever a matter of controversy. He simply ‘stood there’ and allowed the cult to develop. Eventually John Paul II, well known for having multiplied beatifications and canonizations on an unprecedented scale, and himself a devotee of Padre Pio, beatified him and then elevated him to sainthood in 2002.

The case of Padre Pio shows the hierarchy struggling to control a cult which might get out of hand: control over the shrine in San Giovanni Rotondo was first transferred from the Franciscans to the local bishop and later the renowned architect Renzo Piano was commissioned to design a vast sanctuary which, while perhaps better adapted to receive pilgrims in large numbers, is utterly out of keeping with the needs of visitors who continue to prefer the older church where the saint had been buried and which offers the niches and intimacy which they seek ([Mesaritou 2009](#_ENREF_37)). In 2008 Padre Pio’s body was exhumed and his hands and chest were found to be intact.

Exchange with the supernatural involves a dose of ambiguity, manipulating the balance between hope and despair and insuring against failure. But with institutionalization the ambiguity becomes less threatening, more routinized, more consolation than cure, more discipline or doctrine than manipulation of an individual’s state of mind. We see this in accounts of pilgrimage sites where a routine is established for visitors who are inclined, as if programmed, to believe that visiting is a matter of following a routine, of participating in notionally set rituals of touching certain objects or places, of doing what they assume has to be done. In Bax’s account of Medjugorje, for example ([Bax 1995](#_ENREF_6)), he describes pilgrims being taken off by a tour company on a preset route, making confession and attending mass. Medjugorje, located in a particularly contested part of Croatia, is the site of several instances of visions of the Virgin Mary by seers in 1981 who have remained there and continue to receive messages from her which they convey to the public in daily sessions. The content of the messages, at least as filtered by the Franciscan friars who manage the site, is inoffensive and in conformity with Church doctrine. By touching objects in the vicinity of the site, by taking home stones, rosaries and the like, and by physical contact with the seers, to whom they attribute quasi-medical powers (p. 39), pilgrims return home armed with the power of the site. Inevitably, visitors have introduced healing into their routine, while the persons responsible try to strike a balance between that pressure and the risks of sanctions by the authorities for illegal practice of medicine. Unlike Lourdes, the Medjugorje claims of visions, ongoing ever since 1981, have not been endorsed by the Vatican, so there is no certification procedure. On the other hand, the Franciscans (who have been displaced at the Padre Pio shrine in Italy) have not been punished for their involvement. The visits incorporate much standard Catholic ritual – Mass, confession – thus adding to the routinization effect and tempering hopes of instant solutions.

The difficulty represented for modernism by the exchanges which lie at the heart of popular religion is well illustrated by Olivia Harris’s account of a young Spanish priest schooled in post-conciliar (i.e. post-Vatican II) modernism and social commitment trying to perform his duties properly in a highland Bolivian parish: he drives away in his overloaded jeep after unwillingly accepting the gifts of corn and potatoes and much else and enduring an interminable Mass - interminable because of the votive offerings, promises and exchanges which had to be dealt with individually ([Harris 2006: 56](#_ENREF_22)). He is embarrassed by what he sees as gifts - gifts pressed upon him despite his insistence that the Communion is offered freely, and that all that is required is for a person to be in a state of grace. But for the faithful these are precisely not gifts because they form part of the reciprocity which is essential to their relationship with the supernatural. They, after all, are heirs to 500 years of coexistence between Catholic divinity and their 'own' mountain spirits.

The substratum of popular religion is evident in Catholicism worldwide, but it is also present in Judaism and in Islam. In Judaism the most visible expression of Ashkenazi popular religion has been in the Chassidic sects which arose in Eastern Europe in the late 18th century and flourished thereafter until the Shoah – since when they have had a worldwide renewal. The Chassidim developed from a movement following a particular mystical figure (the Baal Shem-Tov, d. 1760) into a movement of millions of followers of pious or righteous men (*tzaddikim*) who had ‘collapsed the distinction between normative and popular religion‘ ([Sharot 2011: 77](#_ENREF_41)). The tzaddikim were not precisely intercessors, in the manner of Christian saints, but rather a channel to God. The usual term used in English is that they 'cleaved' to God, they were people possessed of a ‘higher’, more mystical religiosity which brought them close to the divine, and their followers cleaved to them in the same way. The tzaddik was ‘able to capture divine power and channel that power down to his earthly dependents’ (ibid.). But they also looked to him for cures and blessings as well as advice: the tzaddik somehow managed to combine ‘the high status of the mystic with engagement in popular religion’, and he would receive a ‘redemption fee’ when followers came to ask for his intervention (ibid.).

Yet this apparently uncontrollable effervescence, which encountered fierce internecine opposition from the learned centres of Vilna especially, eventually was institutionalized in dynasties in the 19th century, and this continues today.[[4]](#footnote-4) The followers of the Talmudic scholars of Vilna came to be described as the opponents (*mitnagdim*), associated with an austere religiosity centred of study of Rabbinic texts and today known as Lithuanians. So one might suppose that the popular religion of the Chasidim, whose dynamic core was composed of business people rather than the unlettered masses ([Dynner 2006](#_ENREF_15)), has been tamed or neutralized, but there is another interpretation which sees a continuation of popular religion in Torah study, for all its erudition.

Today the practice of Torah study, which has become a mass phenomenon ([Friedman 1986](#_ENREF_18); [Soloveitchik 1994](#_ENREF_42)), is itself a type of popular religion, justified in terms of keeping a tradition alive, and even of saving the state of Israel. Torah study has many of the attributes of popular religion: it follows rhythms of the day, the month and the year; it rests on esoteric story-telling and the combination and recombination of elements from a vast corpus, it is oblivious to modern scientific scholarship, it relies heavily on oral communication, and its leading lights, who are honoured with rituals of deference and never retire, have an extraordinary array of esoteric and linguistic learning. Yeshiva students learn, typically, in pairs which stage ritualized disputes on abstruse points. This is not study in the secular sense of learning to master a body of knowledge, let alone of acquiring a certificate, not in the sense of training for the priesthood – which is secular learning: For yeshiva students, examinations are a formality and the resulting qualifications are more an entitlement than an achievement, counting for less than the recommendation of the yeshiva head and the opportunity to make a successful match ([Lehmann and Siebzehner 2009](#_ENREF_33)).

So in Judaism the culture of learning, for all its esotericism and erudition, does not count as an official culture in the way that Catholic seminaries or Anglican theological colleges might: it is too much subject to unwritten and uncodified habits and customs which are variously certified and debated by Rabbis who forever reach differing conclusions. Only in Israel is there something like a codification because of the official character of the Rabbinic Courts, but the scope of their rulings covers only the narrow issue of qualifying people for citizenship under the Law of Return, plus kosher certification (which even then is not strict enough for everybody). The puzzle for outsiders accustomed to a theologically driven notion of religious adherence arises from the embeddedness of Jewish strictness and Orthodoxy in daily life. Ultra-Orthodoxy is immersion in a life suffused with habits and rituals which consist of automatic, almost compulsive, practices. If you ask about their ‘origins’ or justification, you may be given an esoteric interpretation buried in the mists time, but it will be vague and the interlocutor will regard it as a silly or irrelevant question: touching the scroll on a doorpost as you enter a room; washing left and right hands before a meal in a specified order, pouring water three times over each hand using a two-handled jug; keeping one’s head covered at all times; maximizing the number of children… the list is endless, and is constantly being augmented. In addition, it is by no means clear that the apparently unending tightening of stringency in contemporary ultra-Orthodoxy derives from pressure from the Rabbis: it may well be that it comes from ‘below’, from anxiety among followers, especially those newly returned to strict observance (*t’shuva*, or ‘repentance, return).

Aside from this merging of the popular and the erudite, Judaism also exhibits the classic exchange relationship with the supernatural mediated by tzaddikim of various kinds In contrast, especially in North African and Middle Eastern (Sephardi) traditions. These fit more with the model of exchange, and are very similar to that of the neighbouring Muslim populations, to the point that according to Issachar Ben-Ami out of '656 Jewish saints' in modern Morocco '126' were venerated by both Jews and Muslims ([Ben-Ami 1998](#_ENREF_7); [Sharot 2011: 74](#_ENREF_41)), before the Jewish culture of the Maghreb was destroyed by mass emigration in the wake of Israel's creation and the subsequent wars. It survives in modern Israel, in the form of cultural celebrations and veneration of Rabbis of distinguished lineage ([Bilu and Ben-Ari 1992](#_ENREF_8)).

Many practices which are standard in the ultra-Orthodox world fit well with the model of relating to the supernatural or fending off misfortune described earlier. In case of illness, people may say ‘check the mezuzah’: this refers to small devices attached to doors in many Jewish houses, for these contain tiny scrolls on which a prayer is written: the sick person or their kin are advised to check that the prayer does not contain a mistake. If a child misbehaves parents or others concerned are advised to check into the background and see whether perhaps there is not a mixed marriage in the genealogy somewhere, or a marriage to a non-Jewish employee. People consult rabbis on these matters, but not always, and they may also consult several rabbis if the opinion or ruling they hear is not to their liking. They owe less to expected rewards than to the pressure to keep on the right side of ‘the law’. This law is inherently uncertain, subject to multiple interpretations, whose obedience is unforgivingly enforced by gossip. Indeed, most customs are derived from tradition and no ‘system’ or set of principles is invoked to encompass them. Not for nothing did Isaac Bashevis Singer once write: ‘the first words I can remember hearing were “It is forbidden”…’ ([Bashevis Singer 1979: 11](#_ENREF_5)).

The Abrahamic religions have institutionalized religion and as a result they can create relationships of trust which underpin a postponement of salvation or redemption till an unknown and unknowable future. The devotion of their followers thus does not seem to have an immediate return, However, this official religion exists in a dialectic relationship with a popular religion which is concerned with this-worldly rewards, with the ties of community and with a built-in message that those ties are ancient, have ‘roots’. The idea is very similar to Linda Woodhead’s terms strategic and tactical religion and indeed she also uses the word ‘dialectical:

… strategy and tactics form and shape one another dialectically. The strategist cannot merely impose, for the tactical will find ways over, under, through, and around strategic plans, targets, rewards and sanctions. But if the strategist plans for such things, his plans contain the impress of the tactical, and the tactical inheres in the strategic. Likewise, the tactical may anticipate and try to foil the strategic, thereby internalising it and bowing to its logic. And the strategic, when it resorts to trickery and deception, dissolves into the tactical. Thus the tactical and strategic form the conditions of the other’s possibility, the potential pathways of realisation, and the horizons of one another’s dissolution – within an unequal exchange ([Woodhead 2012](#_ENREF_46))

If my concept is different from hers, it is in its addition of the dimensions of time, or history, and of the ways in which popular religion creates ties of interdependence among people who live together in neighbourhoods, villages and so on. So to some extent it is a dated concept which may require recasting in contemporary conditions. But whereas Woodhead, in a lecture at the ‘New Forms of Public Religion’ conference in Cambridge later in 2012, focuses on personal spiritualities which exhibit a highly fragmented and dispersed organization, characteristic of Western Europe and North America in particular, I will present a rather different, parallel, evolution dynamized by Pentecostalism in Latin America but which also is widely observed in Africa, and in Europe among immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.

*Latin America: the dialectic transcended in a time of both religious revival and secularization*

Pope John Paul II undertook a campaign of beatifications and canonizations with the intention – presumably – of encouraging a revival of popular religion. But if we look more carefully at the sort of revivals which Catholicism is currently experiencing, can they be called ‘popular religion’? They are led by a multiplicity of devotional movements such as the Neocatechumenals or Neocatechumenates, the *Sodalitium Christianae Vitae*(a Society for Apostolic Life), Communione e Liberazione, Opus Dei, the Legionaries of Christ and more besides. Each has distinctive features, so these few paragraphs cannot do justice to the variety. Among the most visible is the Charismatic Renewal and its multiple offshoots and loosely connected branches, in the massive Youth Festivals which Popes have attracted in Paris, in Sydney and Rio de Janeiro (2013) and in the mediatic success of celebrity priests like Brazil’s Marcelo Rossi whose little book of moralisms entitled ‘Agape’ (‘Hope’ or ‘Love’) ([Rossi 2010](#_ENREF_40)) has been at the top of the country’s best-seller lists for as long as anyone can remember (it sold 2 million copies in its first six months in 2010-11). The revival is patchy but intensely expressed in local charismatic groups across the world whose practices are often largely indistinguishable from those of Pentecostal churches. Despite their advertised mysticism, their direct receipt of Gifts of the Spirit and their inclination towards corporeal expressiveness, the charismatic movement is developing a religious culture which is distinguished by its this-worldly orientation in contrast to the traditional themes of the eternal, the Kingdom, the transcendent, and does not share the dimensions of community and heritage associated with classic conceptions of popular religion, of which that of Carlos Brandão seems to me the one which best combines theoretical and practical dimensions ([Lehmann 2002](#_ENREF_29); [Brandão 2007](#_ENREF_12)). Marcelo Rossi’s book consists of a series of moralisms and exhortations to love and do good with little reference if any to salvation and few exhortations to sacrifice: the themes include ‘love’, ‘light - which brings lies and vice out of the shadows’ - and persistence, more even than faith. In a series of studies of new Catholic communities, Brenda Carranza and Cecilia Mariz describe ventures (not only charismatic in style) like the creation of abstemious alternative communities, charitable works, evangelizing activities, self-realization programmes, evangelizing radio stations – but the common factor is their vocation to change people and to make them live better lives in accordance with officially approved Catholic morality and also in accordance with their own inner selves ([Carranza, Mariz et al. 2009](#_ENREF_14)). Catholic popular religion in the classic image, whether veneration of world-famous patron saints or innumerable local saints and Virgins, or prayer groups led by lay women saying their rosary, is not particularly concerned with the policing or reform of morals, let alone with self-realization.

What Carranza calls ‘a new religious genre oriented by emotion’ ([Carranza 2009: 50](#_ENREF_13)) has much in common with Woodhead’s ‘tactical religion’, like a religious version of the vast culture of self-realization and self-knowledge described by Eva Illouz and many others as a pervasive feature of modernity ([Illouz 2008](#_ENREF_25); [Illouz 2012](#_ENREF_26)). It calls on adepts to abandon a world of superficiality and consumerism by, for example, embracing the opportunity to serve (looking after street children among many other possibilities), or to retreat from the world and take a vow of poverty or chastity: a ‘utopia of a profane neo-Christendom’ ([Carranza, Mariz et al. 2009: 143](#_ENREF_14)). Taken together these studies reveal a space within Catholicism for choice and entrepreneurship: numerous alternative paths to the life of a good Catholic. Even the fasting and abstention is not for the sake of the rest of us, as it is in traditional Catholicism: as part of the therapy culture of self-exploration and self-improvement, such sacrifices and bodily afflictions are chosen by individuals as and when they see fit rather than as part of a ritual cycle as in heritage religion (Jews fast on Yom Kippur and certain other specified days; Catholics used to abstain from meat on Fridays etc.). Woodhead in her Cambridge lecture specifically mentions this shift whereby devotions or supernatural communication cease to be dictated by official calendars and follow instead the needs or desires of the subject.

So in delineating these new forms of non-official Catholicism from what I have called classic popular religion, three factors stand out: (a) ‘tradition’; (b) therapy or healing, and (c) authority. The new forms detach themselves from tradition and heritage as expressed in public celebration at local, national and global levels; they distance themselves from the immediacy of healing but delve instead into therapy and self-exploration; but they share with classic popular religion their conformity with the hierarchy and erudite religion. To be sure, classic popular religion may engage in unorthodox practices (animal sacrifices in the highland Andes for example), but these are not of the kind to undermine priestly or episcopal authority. The Lourdes and Padre Pio examples show that the hierarchy can regain control when, so to speak, ‘things get out of hand’. The difference, in the relationship with authority, is that the devotional movements place much more emphasis on morals and doctrine, not departing one iota from the Papal message.

This can be interpreted as a modern, secular ethos which propagates hope as the building of a new world on earth and in this life: the element of exchange with the supernatural, in the way of *votos* and *ex-votos*, of pilgrimages and sacrifices, is out of the picture. Charismatics invoke gifts of the spirit which are bestowed upon them for the sake of achievements in this world – for example that they can preach, that they can heal or be healed. They need priests and bishops as safeguards or guarantors of the acceptability of their practices, but they tend to invent ritual ‘on the hop’. Even the most deeply traditionalist devotional movements, Opus Dei, has also engaged, so we understand, in liturgical and ritual innovation forms – the classic modernist device of reinventing tradition and, in this case, making it more rigid than ever, like the Jewish ultra-Orthodox.

*The secularisation of religious reason in Liberation Theology*

This-worldly concerns are by no means confined to conservatively inclined movements, as the history of Latin American Catholic *basismo*, inspired by the Theology of Liberation, amply testifies. Priests and male and female religious put their lives in danger and some were killed in fighting for social justice, standing in the way of land grabs in Amazonia, and in the civil wars in Salvador and Guatemala. None, such as the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero[[5]](#footnote-5), have ever been beatified. These people certainly sacrificed themselves for the rest of humanity, but for humanity to be protected in this world.

Liberation Theology orientates Christians towards a Kingdom in this world, of social justice, in a vision inspired by a concept of ‘structural sin’ affixed to social structures, not to individuals. Salvation, in Gutierrez’ classic work ([Gutierrez 1973](#_ENREF_21)), is an intra-historic matter; it transforms history in this world. In this theology care of one’s neighbour is something other than a good deed to achieve eternal salvation – the ‘neighbour’ stands for society as a whole, and to work for social change is to do the work of God; eschatology is not an escape from history but involvement in the political field and in social praxis. Charity is not about pity but about the pursuit of social justice (ibid. p.278). The argument is not pamphleteering: it is developed in conjunction with close readings of Biblical and theological texts. The word salvation is gradually, though not fully, replaced by the word liberation; the Kingdom is not brought down to earth, but the announcement of the Kingdom is one of brotherhood of men as a part of the pursuit of the full communion of all people with God (ibid. p.309). Liberation Theology sees Christianity as so non-sectarian as to be uninterested in converting those it seeks to save: they would be saved by living in a more just world.

It is often said that Liberation Theology (*Teología de la Liberación* – TL) is a Marxist politicization of religion and that it took the religious life out of Catholicism. This is unfair and partial, as I explained many years ago ([Lehmann 1990](#_ENREF_27); [Lehmann 1996](#_ENREF_28)): Gutierrez used a Marxist method in his 1967 book and thereafter studiously avoided it. The word was used to denigrate their ideas by tarring them with the brush of materialism, as well as by accusing the priests and religious among them of disregard for authority. But in many ways TL was a branch of the modernist trend in Christian theology, focusing on the living Jesus and an activist Church, but retaining the idea of doctrine and theology, retaining the separateness of clergy and laity, and retaining the idea of a church sacrificing itself for the good of others – of society. TL does not focus on the personalized religion which some devotional movements promote, nor on the ritualization of daily life which Opus Dei and the Legionnaires seem to promote. For TL popular religion has not always served the interests of the people and its heritage and community dimensions should be made more relevant to their sufferings and their daily lives: thus in the 1990s in Brazil a group of religious in Rio de Janeiro developed a ‘Missa Afro’ (a liturgy for the Mass in African style) which incorporated elements aiming to show a recognition of the African heritage of Brazil’s black population. S this is a secularization of religious reason, but along quite different lines from the devotional movements which to some extent were encouraged to counter the influence of TL.

The heyday of Liberation Theology coincided with a spurt in the growth, or at least the visibility, of Pentecostalism in Latin America. When that Pentecostalism started out in the early twentieth century, embedded in rural areas and the poorest urban strata, it emphasized self-discipline and respectability, as well as healing and the struggle against the forces of evil. But with the rise of neo-Pentecostalism at the turn of the century, a strong element of self-realization and the therapeutic moves centre stage. The most extreme expression of the self-realization strand, which does stretch most common-sense notions of what can count as religious, is described in a US context by T. Luhrmann ([Luhrmann 2012](#_ENREF_34)): this is a religious subculture with barely any institutionalization or any limitations on what can be done in the name of religion.

*The dialectic transcended: beyond popular religion*

Popular Catholicism revolves around rituals which take place at particular times, in accordance with long-established formulae, and in particular places, conducted by designated persons (not always priests, but always with priestly blessing) in fixed roles. Although these practices change over time, they do so incrementally and imperceptibly and they carry an aura of faithfulness to deep tradition, with a strong sense of origins and authenticity. Official ritual shares these characteristics but, in addition, carries the imprint of faithfulness to ancient texts and recorded commandments, in addition to institutionalization, traditions of music and bodily expression, liturgy carried out by personnel invested with charisma and versed in esoteric procedures whose meaning is enshrined in age-old interpretations. The official rarely suppresses the popular even if the latter strays from strict orthodoxy: indeed very often it is encouraged, as we saw earlier on, and the popular is usually respectful of official orthodoxy. But the popular does respond to the demand for immediate this-worldly solutions to life’s problems in a way that the official does not.

Pentecostal churches, in contrast, cannot be said either to have stable sets of rituals or to have a liturgy in the Catholic, Anglican or Jewish sense. They certainly have recourse to an identifiable repertoire of calls on supernatural forces, but these are short invocations rather than ritual procedures, and their services do not follow a fixed set of written invariant prayers. Many invocations are in the form of exchanges between preachers and their listeners, when the preacher calls for a response and the congregation cry ‘Amen!’ or ‘Hallelujah!’. They can be thought of as cues, or just speech acts: during services preachers at several points make apparently improvised perorations often backed up with sound effects designed to manage emotion. This absence of elaborate ritual procedures is related to the core Pentecostal doctrine that gifts of the spirit are precisely that – gifts - not learnt in prolonged training - and to the concomitant idea of the potential for priesthood on the part of all believers, and is incompatible with the notion that a particular status conferred by the hierarchy or organization (comparable to that of a priest in the Catholic or Anglican churches) would bring with it charismatic gifts or a privileged role of intermediary with the supernatural is excluded. If Pentecostal services nevertheless exhibit a remarkably uniform set of speaking styles, iterated across the globe, this is not because they are subordinated to any sort of common authority.

Despite this democracy of the spiritual, decision-making authority in most evangelical churches in Latin America and Africa is usually heavily concentrated and exercised in impenetrable ways. To be sure there is enormous variation, but accounts of pastors who involve their congregants in decision-making are unusual ([Garma Navarro 2004](#_ENREF_19); [Englund 2007](#_ENREF_16)), and unheard of in large-scale neo-Pentecostal organizations[[6]](#footnote-6).

Among Pentecostals there is not a set of procedures to be executed at fixed times of a life cycle, an annual cycle, or a seasonal cycle. When an *obreiro* (Portuguese for church workers, usually volunteers) approaches you, places three fingers of one hand on your forehead and yells ‘Out, out, out’, that is hardly an esoteric procedure. Pastors, preachers, *obreiros* are authorized or empowered to bless congregants, to invoke the supernatural power of Jesus to heal physical and psychological ailments, and to exorcize the forces of evil from their lives, their families, their homes.

Neo-Pentecostalism is in many ways an even more radical break than its predecessor Pentecostalism. At its core is a model of a highly centralized and global church organization in which the themes of donation and diabolic possession and exorcism take pride of place. Pentecostalism, in contrast, is more discrete on these subjects and is highly decentralized, so that pastors have to manage their own churches and if they want to be professionals it is their business to achieve a corresponding growth in their churches. The earliest model of this type of church is probably the Brazil-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which has millions of followers in Brazil and millions more across the world, especially in other Latin American countries, in Portugal and in Africa. The Universal Church has also been strongly influenced by the prosperity Gospel, but that is only one, and perhaps not the principal, feature distinguishing it and others like it from classic Pentecostalism ([Lehmann 2011](#_ENREF_32); [Lehmann 2011](#_ENREF_31)).

Roles in Pentecostal churches – which still have many more adherents - and neo-Pentecostal churches relate more to organizational than to ritual responsibilities: *obreiros* undertake practical tasks, patrol the aisles in the larger churches, and ensure everything is in order. In the Universal Church I have encountered pastors responsible for tasks like education, public relations or security, as well as preaching or managing a church, and, at the upper end, there is something like a senior management whose members are known as Bishops. When I sought to interview their leading architect for example, I was told that this required the ‘permission of the top management’ – which was eventually obtained. In the classic model of small churches and chapels the dynamic is quite different: one individual controls all aspects of the church, material and spiritual and if someone in the congregation has leadership ambitions he will set up a separate church or chapel. The context is however a dynamic one, and the Pentecostal field is changing, so that we observe a trend towards the neo-Pentecostal model even among the pastors of the Assemblies of God, a loose worldwide confederation which is the umbrella group for the classic model.

Little is known about training in neo-Pentecostal churches, and they are certainly not keen to open it up to researchers: to judge by their conduct of services, they may learn techniques of effective preaching and management of the emotional state of a congregation. The widespread distrust in Pentecostal culture of erudite knowledge and of the sort of theological training which is required of Catholic and mainstream Protestant clergy, is well documented ([Anderson 2004](#_ENREF_2)): such learning is regarded as detracting from the spiritual and inspirational, though there are variations and exceptions. Nonetheless, as evidence of the constantly changing landscape of evangelical Christianity, the leaders of the Igreja Apostolica Unidade em Deus in the Ilha do Governador in Rio de Janeiro are starting what they hope will be a recognized university level course in Ministry, precisely because they see a need for a more intellectual sort of training.

*Exchange in e secularized religious setting*

The exchange in Pentecostalism is with the church, which expects members to contribute tithes amounting to 10 per cent of their income (before tax). In small chapels where congregants are part of a network of known individuals, contributions can be thought of as a way of affirming membership in an identifiable group and church, and of funding a pastor with whom the members are all familiar. According to observation in the early 1990s, in the large-scale Deus é Amor church, people who are not up-to-date with their tithe (*dízimo* - recorded in a little notebook called the *Caderneta da prosperidade* – ‘Prosperity Notebook’) are not allowed to take part in the monthly ritual of the ‘Holy Supper’ (Santa Ceia) – a ritual common among Pentecostals which mimics the Catholic Holy Communion, distributing grape juice and a wafer. In the Universal Church there is no such concrete exchange, nor can congregants be said to form a community: they are too numerous to know one another, the churches are located increasingly in non-residential areas which can accommodate their imposing size, and the organization itself discourages communal interaction for example by constantly rotating its pastors and preachers – a ‘Church of Strangers’ in the words of a thesis on its expansion into South Africa ([van Wyk 2008](#_ENREF_45)).

But how then can such churches persuade people to become regular attenders and workers? They do not want them to drop in for a ‘fix’ and never reappear, thus circumventing the commitment to make contributions or pay their tithes. As an illustration, in September 2011 in a large temple of the Universal Church in the Boa Vista neighbourhood of Recife (capacity c. 3000 plus offices and underground car park) I asked an attendant whether they still distributed plastic bags with water from the River Jordan to be used in purifying a household: the reply was that they had been instructed to stop this practice because people would just come in to pick up the miraculous water but would then not return. It may sound like a detail, but the underlying structure is important: these churches may seem to offer well-being and God’s blessings for free but attracting and retaining converts is their raison d’être. They have to persuade their followers that adherence and contribution are part of the effort at ‘helping themselves’. The exchange is not with the supernatural, but with the organization itself, whose agents are the volunteers, the preachers and the pastors. It is not easy to interpret what congregants think they are getting out of the church: in interviews the standard narrative is about the renunciation of vice-ridden ways, about a life which changed in a fundamental way, about the healing of physical and mental illnesses, but it sounds too much like a ready-made formula to be entirely convincing. Maybe what people really mean when reciting the narrative is that they found someone to listen to them– and pastors and preachers sometimes say they offer counselling as if they were doing so in a quasi-professional way. It is not uncommon to observe these consultations, which are not very prolonged and tend to conclude with a brief invocation or a cry of ‘Out!’ to free the individual of demonic possession. They may even offer a house visit by a team to remove evil spirits[[7]](#footnote-7). The leadership no doubt hopes that its services – personal and collective - will encourage people to become regular members and regular contributors.[[8]](#footnote-8) A recent newcomer to the Brazilian Pentecostal field, the Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus (World Church of God’s Power) led by Valdemiro Santiago, a breakaway from the Universal Church, has had a meteoric success offering a reduced diet of little but healing: people are exhibited in outdoor events as having recovered from all sorts of ailments and these are broadcast on the Church’s own cable television channel.

If a person publicly contributes money, responding at the extreme by giving more than he or she can afford, for all that it is part of an exchange, the experience of failure will also be an experience of shame or guilt, and so the incentive to overcome his or her misfortune is increased, an incentive accentuated by the churches’ own message that each person must give yet each person is responsible. To say, in the wake of disappointment, that it is all the fault of the church is to expose oneself to the accusation of gullibility, to feel a fool, something most people would prefer to avoid. This is unlikely to be the rationale consciously followed by all adepts of the neo-Pentecostal churches, who may donate for all sorts of reasons, but it does offer a coherent structure to explain what many observers believe to be incomprehensible behaviour or else simply the actions of suckers. To dismiss the actions of millions of people in this way is to abandon the task of explanation.

In constructing a model of an adept’s motivation, we must recall the extreme diversity of evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and remember that we are referring principally to Latin American and Africa. Innumerable small Pentecostal churches still account for the vast majority of Pentecostal faithful in Brazil ([Almeida 2004](#_ENREF_1)) and probably everywhere, and in these the motivation to make donations is probably simply to enable the chapels to exist and to fund a pastor, who would rarely be able to maintain himself from his congregants’ contributions. There are no doubt other motivations as well, but that one is the simplest. Neo-Pentecostal churches are quite different: they are almost business ventures. The explanation offered here in terms of exchange and self-respect is not intended to be more than partial: motivations are many and varied, but the pattern is by now so standardized across geographical and cultural boundaries, that a model is nevertheless called for.

*Ritual promiscuity*

The Catholic Church is not a closed institution which keeps a list of members: one may have to fulfil some minimum conditions to take communion, but services and the churches are open. For centuries Catholic bishops took a prominent role in events of national importance in countries where the state recognized the Church. Likewise, Catholic popular religion belongs to a community, not just to the members of a church or organization. The spirit of inclusiveness goes even further with the incorporation or co-optation of indigenous practices and ideas into popular Catholicism as we saw in Olivia Harris’ description of the Andean village, and as Antoinette Molinié describes for a Castilian village ([Molinié 2004](#_ENREF_38)). Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism emphasize joining, membership and tithing, and whereas a Catholic or Anglican, once baptized remains a Catholic or Anglican, membership in Pentecostal churches has to be constantly renewed through tithing and attendance. Pentecostal pastors do not attach much importance to their role in celebrating marriages and Pentecostal churches do not own cemeteries: for that one goes to the mainstream religious institutions.

The larger-scale, more centralized neo-Pentecostal churches are more open and less interested in creating a tightly-knit community linked to a church. Rather they throw open their doors, keep them open all day long every day, and provide a service: the Universal Church calls itself a ‘spiritual emergency service’[[9]](#footnote-9) It aims to rival the Catholic Church for hegemony in the religious field by building imposing pastiche neo-classical façades in prominent locations and establishing a prominent media presence. The instability of its ritual and symbolic formulae indicates that the leaders are still experimenting. The example of the water from the River Jordan was one instance: another is the oscillating relationship with the Afro-Brazilian – or African – imaginary: its preachers and workers oscillate between mocking the paraphernalia of possession cults and encouraging followers’ fear of the devils which lie within them.[[10]](#footnote-10) The IURD collects prayer notes (‘pedidos de promessa’) like Catholic votos which are collected and deposited in a simulacrum of the Ark of the Covenant for transport to Israel and offering as a kind of burnt sacrifice on Mount Sinai.[[11]](#footnote-11) It also forefronts Jewish themes by displaying seven-branch candelabras on the podiums of its meeting halls. The infatuation with Judaism reaches a new height with the construction of the monumental ‘Temple of Solomon' in the Braz district of São Paulo, due to be completed in 2014. So while rejecting the nearby heritage of Catholicism, they reach out to a distant one in Judaism, and one which is not connected to the lives of their followers.

Whether the churches indulge the spirits from the cults or try to stamp on them, they are adopting an approach which demystifies them, and they are not engaging in elaborate esoteric procedures to fight them off. There is a matter-of-factness to their response which is disconcerting for someone who seeks an interpretation in terms of ritual and symbolism. A distant example, from New Guinea again, illustrates this rather well: Robbins recounts that the Urapmin, having renounced the cult of their ancestors, took their bones away, holding them at the end of long poles, and burnt them; nonetheless, in the case of particularly important ancestors they did not burn them but placed them in a safe hiding place. Later they started hunting in a taboo area, previously reserved for the ancestors, but when some people fell ill after eating the meat from the animals they had been hunting, the big men quickly declared the ground taboo again. Nevertheless, in a delightful phrase the Urapmin said they saw no return: ‘after how we treated those ancestors, there is no way they would have us back’ ([Robbins 2004: 146-150](#_ENREF_39)).

*Saying the unsaid*

And yet, and yet… remember how the Urapmin in their prolonged truth-speaking sessions, were frank to one another about trivialities, but held back what really mattered – their squabbles and disputes - till they had been resolved. Similarly the neo-Pentecostal churches are physically open all day seven days a week, always providing an *obreiro* or pastor to listen to someone’s troubles. But the structures which underpin the listening pastor is hermetic: they reveal nothing about their finances, save to the tax authorities, nor about their training methods, nor about their management methods, nor about how their bishops and pastors are paid. They have extensive interests in the media and have accumulated untold riches: according to *Forbes Brasil*, the head of the Universal Church, Edir Macedo, is worth US$950m, and two of the next four richest are former associates of his: the leader of the very recently founded Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus (World Church of God’s Power), Valdemiro Santiago is worth $220m, and the leader of the Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus (Internal Church of the Grace of God), R.R. Soares, a brother-in-law of Macedo, $125m. Two others are worth respectively $150m and $65m. The same is observed in Nigeria ([Marshall 2010](#_ENREF_36)). While millions of Brazilians follow these men and not infrequently attribute their happiness or success to their attendance at their churches and even to their contributions to them, millions of others regard them as cynical opportunists profiting from the ingenuity of the poor. The TV network TV Record television network is owned, as far as is known, by Macedo himself but its relationship with the Universal Church and with the money donated to the church is unknown. Officers of the Church can be met at the TV Record offices and TV Record has recording studios at its Rio de Janeiro ‘Cathedral of Faith’. No wonder some Brazilian commentators have asked whether the Constitutional separation of religion and the state, which allows churches and other religious institutions exemption from tax on the basis that religion is not a business, has not been overtaken by events.

So the church doors are wide open, but behind the podium there is mystery, and apart from their perfunctory encounters in the church hall, the pastors and preachers are kept isolated from the followers. The parking lots at Universal Church meeting places often seem to be full of *obreiros* and pastors gossiping. The esoteric, the mysterious is there, but it is not in the ritual, which as we have explained has none of the impenetrable symbolism which characterizes shamanic ritual or the mystery of transubstantiation in Catholicism. The mystery is in the organization.

So where have we arrived? The most dynamic form of Christianity, or at least of organized faith in Jesus Christ, in the world today, professes no theology, speaks little if at all about the life hereafter, demands that its followers make sacrifices for the sake of their Church not for the sake of their salvation, demands no sacrifice of its personnel save full-time dedication to the Church and its management, and offers followers an exchange not with the supernatural, but with the organization itself. The reward promised to its followers, *if they too make the effort*, is success in this life – a happy family, a secure marriage, a comfortable lifestyle. It would seem that the old certainties may have to be discarded, even categories like popular religion – for in neo-Pentecostalism there is no heritage and no community and the ritual is denuded of mystery or of its binding quality, leaving a repertoire of gestures and imprecations whose meaning has no mystery at all.

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1. I do not regard Judaism as having a theology in the same sense as Christianity – that is an elaborate theodicy and philosophy of existence constructed in a manner aspiring to complete coherence and closure. Judaism, to summarize another massive issue, is a rather a tradition revolving around a legal heritage in the Talmud. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. among innumerable examples 1 Kings 18. Not only did the Prophet Elijah demonstrate that his God could burn an offering without setting fire underneath it while Baal’s priests could not: he also immediately slew all 450 of them at the brook Kishon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 68 miraculous cures have been recognized by the ‘Bureau des Constatations Médicales’ whose rulings must themselves be confirmed by the Comité Médical International de Lourdes. The last miraculous cure took place in 2002 but was only officially declared in 2011. In 2012, according to the website of the Comité, a miracle was declared which had taken place in 1964. See <http://fr.lourdes-france.org/approfondir/guerisons-et-miracles/serge-francois-guerison-remarquable> and <http://fr.lourdes-france.org/approfondir/guerisons-et-miracles/68eme-miraculee> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The notion of dynasty though is relativized in the sense that since they usually have many children, and since both sons and sons-in-law compete for succession, much ‘politics’ accompanies the succession process. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Assassinated while saying Mass on March 24th 1980 in San Salvador. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Garma does describe a pastor opening up decision-making in a medium-sized church in Mexico City. Englund describes an attempt by a pastor to hold elections in his church in an impoverished township in Malawi, which failed because members were afraid that the process would become enmeshed in witchcraft and did not credit the secrecy of the vote. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I watched as a preacher arranged this with a family of women who came to the Universal Church in Boa Vista, Recife, in September 2011. The mother described how her son had killed their dog and their cat and drank the animals’ blood. The pastor concluded the house was under the power of the devil and promised to send a team along to exorcise it. He spoke to me in quite a matter-of-fact way about this exchange immediately afterwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ronaldo de Almeida has conducted some analyses of a 1998 Ministry of Health survey on the sexual behaviour of the Brazilian population and of his own 2003 survey in the São Paulo Metropolitan Region and these showed that respondents had changed their religious affiliation during their lives – indeed the São Paulo survey showed that one third had done so. It also showed that Pentecostal churches were the primary gainers from these shifts, but neither survey distinguished between Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal adherents and retention rates cannot be deduced from the analysis. It should be said that in a fast-moving and crowded environment it would be very difficult to capture retention Putnam and Campbell did chart changes of affiliation in their US survey but they did not attempt to describe the retention rates for different types of churches (Almeida, R. d. and P. Monteiro (2001). "Trânsito religioso no Brasil." São Paulo em Perspectiva **15**(3): 92-100.

   , Almeida, R. d. (2004). "Religião na metrópole paulista." Revista Brasileira de Ciencias Sociais **19**(56): 15-27.

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   . [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Um pronto-socorro espiritual’ in Portuguese. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In a paper delivered in Cambridge in May 2011, Linda van de Kamp describes how in Mozambique pastors sent by the Universal Church sometimes make fun of images and devices from the country’s indigenous cults, yet at other times advise followers to avoid confrontation and indeed to engage and tame the devils which might be attacking women through their husbands’ misbehaviour. (Linda van der Kamp: ‘South-South Transnational Spaces of Conquest: Brazilian Pentecostalism, 'Macumba' and the Reproductive Domain in Mozambique’.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Israeli tour guides confirm that Universal Church pastors do arrive with suitcases full of these notes, though there is some doubt if the ceremony, which is filmed, always takes place on Mount Sinai. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)