

Gilberto Nascimento: *O Reino: a História de Edir Macedo e uma Radiografia da Igreja Universal*. (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019), pp. 384, \$30.59 pb.

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The Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD) is the prototype of neo-Pentecostalism. Founded by Edir Macedo in 1977, it has grown into a religious and mediatic empire with financial interests covering more or less the entire globe, though the majority of the pastors and bishops who lead its branches are Brazilian. Its followers in Brazil are counted in millions and it claims 10,000 churches worldwide, in Portugal, the USA, South Africa, Britain, and almost any country you care to mention.

The IURD has been the subject of an extensive literature whose authors can be divided into social scientists who focus on the religious life of its followers, and journalists and dissidents who have reported on its leader's multiple legal imbroglions and the scandals stirred up by expelled or voluntarily departed pastors and bishops. This division is important and raises methodological and ethical issues for scientific research. If scholars are persuaded that millions of true-believing followers are dupes of a camarilla whose sole purpose is the accumulation of wealth and political power, there is little for social science to say. Yet how can we ignore the abundant evidence produced not only by them but also by public prosecutors?

Nonetheless, we should be grateful to Gilberto Nascimento and his assistants for doing a lot of 'spade work' for us. His book documents in detail and with abundant evidence from the press, from interviews and from judicial records, how in less than four decades Macedo built a worldwide religious organization, a media empire with the free-to-air station TV Record at its centre, a massive personal fortune and an indispensable place in his country's politics. Starting in the late 1970s, by 1987 the church already had 356 temples and 27 rented cinemas in Brazil alone. His strategy was to stimulate church attendance through radio and TV, and to gain a political presence to support its development through access to the airwaves, to state controlled banks and to political decision-making and legislation especially in the sphere of tax and media regulation. The strategy has been stunningly successful: the church now has 300 Bishops, several thousand pastors and tens of thousands of *obreiros*, or assistants, who tend to the millions of faithful during services and help to organize prayer groups, youth groups, seniors' groups, soup kitchens, women's groups and more.

One constant throughout has been the role of Macedo's close and extended family. At the start his mother, who Nascimento says had undergone 33 pregnancies, of

which 26 ended in miscarriage, offered her apartment, the family's only property, as a guarantee for the hire of the disused funeral parlour which became the church's first premises. His brother-in-law, RR Soares was a close associate, though later he broke away to establish his own, cable TV-based Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus. In 1986 one of his brothers was elected deputy for Rio de Janeiro and in 1988 another was elected a municipal councillor, both as part of the church's political strategy. One of those brothers later appears as owner of an account in the USA through which funds from tithes and donations were channeled via a currency dealer in São Paulo, then to be forwarded to tax havens in the Caribbean and back to Brazil in a form fit for investment in Macedo's businesses. Macedo's father has been twice elected to the São Paulo City Council. The book contains numerous examples of bewildering shifts in personnel between the church, TV Record, and the large number of other businesses that operate in their orbit: at least at the time of writing one of Macedo's cousins ran a company that published books and recorded materials on behalf of the church, while his brother ran a transport company while another brother was a State Deputy who replaced nephew Marcelo Crivella when the latter was elected Mayor of Rio in 2016. Another cousin worked with Crivella and acted as an intermediary with currency dealers. Crivella himself was successful setting up the church in Mozambique, Angola and South Africa and as a two-term Senator, before being elected Mayor of Rio.

Macedo's wife, daughter and son-in-law are prominent on the IURD's very well designed websites where they post regular blogs offering advice about how to manage a rational and God-fearing life and notably about love and marriage. They are now placed in prominent roles and the son-in-law is regarded as the heir apparent (though such things can change). The son-in-law's brother is the most powerful figure in TV Record as well as a bishop of the church.

Macedo has leveraged the votes of his followers with devastating effect, enabling him to get Ministerial approval for his purchase of TV Record in the 1980s, when then president-elect Fernando Collor in effect ordered TV star-cum-mogul Sylvio Santos to overcome his reservations and seal the deal. On another occasion he managed to get a debt to the state bank of São Paulo (BANESPA) halved thanks to Governor Orestes Quercia, and somehow even that half was reduced during the bank's subsequent privatization.

The book details innumerable lawsuits related to Macedo's financial dealings, others brought by dissident pastors and bishops, and even to three murder inquiries involving church personnel, yet few have even reached a conclusion let alone a conviction, except in minor cases when the church or Macedo or TV Record have had to pay fines or compensation. Many simply run out of time. The church also

uses the law to intimidate or punish irritating journalists, though not always to much effect.

And yet and yet... Nascimento expresses no interest in the millions who attend this church and contribute to its expansion and to the success of TV Record, and despite the abundance of documentation, the title and tone of the book, falling somewhere between mockery and hostility, betrays his bias. He makes no mention of the elaborate attention paid to ritual, to the fashioning of a distinctive style of preaching, to the devices to bind followers to the church, to the adoption of symbols and language from the Africa-originating possession cults, to preachers' tireless insistence on the psychological problems suffered by followers and their traumatic encounters with addiction and suicide, to the willingness of followers to contribute regularly and sometimes very lavishly to calls for tithes and donations, to the ambiguous treatment of wealth as a sign of both a corrupt worldly life and also of the gifts of the Spirit...

We have to be grateful to Nascimento for the information, including its more colourful episodes, even though church personnel would regard as driven by malign motives. But we must also recognize that it is symptomatic of a patronizing attitude prevalent among Brazil's intelligentsia to the Pentecostal faithful whom they tend not to regard as capable of rational independent agency. Hence the ethical issues that arise in research on this subject.