

Avoiding Stigmas and Building Bridges

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Portugal

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The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) – the Brazilian neo-Pentecostal denomination that has invested in international expansion, particularly in Portuguese-speaking countries and those with Portuguese migrants – arrived in Portugal in 1989 to what it proudly called a ‘reverse colonization-evangelization’ (Freston 2000).¹ Crossing the Atlantic from South to North, the Universal Church ambitiously aimed to recreate the missionary encounter on different terms, from below. But within a few years it faced barriers to its proselytizing and was forced to find ways to respond to its stigmatized and marginal status. Recognizing restrictions that were being imposed on its activity, the denomination invested in the construction of its legitimacy and attempted to redefine its social place. This chapter examines the institutional dynamics of the Universal Church in the Portuguese context, calling attention to efforts by the denomination to approximate itself to dominant values and the local imaginary – whether through the reformulation of its public presentation or through a remission to Catholic references and practices.

To do so, I have chosen an analytical route that emphasizes the analysis of plays on language in the broad sense, considering the possibilities of a semiotic investigation of visual elements, linguistic practices and specific vocabularies in their sociocultural dimension (cf. Woolard 1998; Gal 1998). In this process, elements activated by the Universal Church and its religious agents, and by my interlocutors in particular contexts, are examined in their relationship with broader social dynamics. I will

Notes for this chapter begin on page 125.

begin by briefly reviewing the process of the Universal Church's insertion in Portugal.

Founded in 1977, in Rio de Janeiro, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God inaugurated its first space for worship in Portugal on 18 December 1989, in Lisbon's Benfica neighbourhood (Martins and Rosa 1996). At that time, the country had many historical Protestant churches, some Pentecostal evangelical churches, such as the Assembly of God, and other Christian groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses. After a period of repression of different types of worship, with the end of the New State in 1974, these minority religions began to give rise to new religious groups, including the Mormons, which came to Portugal. In the 1980s, the Maná Church [Igreja Maná] appeared, another neo-Pentecostal group that, like Universal, became involved in polemical issues.

Upon establishing itself in Portugal, the UCKG soon invested in proselytism in the mass media. It first bought time on radio stations, then, in 1992, it established its own radio stations: Placard, in Porto; Miramar and Audisinha, in Lisbon (Martins and Rosa 1996). In that year, it purchased the former Império movie theatre, a luxurious space on a corner in Lisbon's traditional Alameda neighbourhood (Farias 1999). This became the headquarters of the denomination in Portugal and provided the church with a magnificent architectural structure that was propitious to the gathering of a large number of people at a good location. The substitution of a traditional leisure space by a place of worship for a Brazilian evangelical church, and in particular for the UCKG, triggered comments, reactions and resistance to the denomination among the Portuguese.

After its arrival in Portugal, news reverberated that questioned the Universal Church. Polemics in Brazil crossed the Atlantic and fed the Portuguese imaginary in relation to the Universal Church. The first impressions about the denomination were based on the wide circulation in the media of a variety of charges and accusations.

Criticism became stronger when the UCKG reached the north of the country and tried to buy the Coliseum of Porto, in 1995.² Protests arose against the sale of the location to the denomination, an act considered offensive, given the building's national cultural importance. With strong support from public figures like artists and politicians, and the Portuguese media, an organized group was able to reverse the sale.

A few months later, the UCKG faced opposition once again. The second episode highlighted in the media took place in a commercial centre in Matosinhos (on the outskirts of Porto), where the denomination once again used a former movie theatre as its place of worship. Members of the Universal Church were surrounded and verbally and physically assaulted (Mafra 2002).

The episodes triggered a prolonged offensive against the Universal Church. From 1995 to 1997, many articles and reports questioned the activities and legitimacy of the Universal Church. The intense reaction to the presence of the UCKG in Portugal, an experience similar to that in Brazil, was responded to by the denomination in both countries with theories of persecution (Mafra 2002). According to these theories, the episodes of resistance, defamation and accusations were biblically foreseen ordeals. The UCKG confronted its adversities and continued to announce the opening of new temples, conducting mass events and broadcasting radio and television programmes, in addition to maintaining its own newspaper. In this way, the denomination sought to turn the visibility attained through scandals into positive repercussions.

In addition, in this initial period, the UCKG also made strong criticisms of the Catholic Church, establishing a clear opposition to the Roman Catholic tradition. Through the mass media, it made accusations against the church and the clergy, which reverberated against itself.

We can say that the first years of the Universal Church's activities in Portugal were marked by tension and intense conflicts and disputes in public spaces. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the presence of the Universal Church also created an impact on Portuguese society and triggered a debate about the 'Catholic tradition' and the recurring discriminatory treatment of other religions (Mafra 2002). In this sense, Mafra emphasized the social role of the UCKG in increasing the plurality of the Portuguese religious field, which culminated in the Law for Religious Liberty in 2001, a review of the Concordata in 2004, and the consequent expansion of groups that benefited by the new criteria for recognition and action of religious entities.³

However, as we will see below, after resistance from public opinion and increased pressure from local authorities, the Universal Church retreated and revised its position in Portugal. Before we examine this change, I will observe how this initial period of the Universal Church in Portugal left a strong mark on the imaginary of my interlocutors.

Recognizing Narratives

The strategies used by the Universal Church upon its arrival in Portugal had some aspects of the denomination gain greater visibility and were marked in the memory of those who accompanied the process, whether closely or at a distance. Considering that all memory is a phenomenon that is constructed consciously or unconsciously, individually and collectively, and results from the organization of ideas, impressions and

interpretations, as well as a negotiation of values (Pollak 1992), it is significant that the remembrance of the episodes from twelve years before were very present in the narratives of many of the people I met in Portugal. At the same time, my interlocutor's perception of the UCKG was strongly influenced by stereotypical portrayals in the media.

Even since I began to study the country's religious dynamics, without mentioning my interest in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, comments have arisen spontaneously in different contexts from people with various profiles and socio-economic contexts, but most of whom were economically active, middle-class, Portuguese-born Catholics, although generally not practising. The Universal Church appeared to be a mandatory subject in a conversation with a Brazilian anthropologist interested in studying religions. My national identity established a tie to the Universal Church and helped to trigger comments about the denomination. In the same way, the mark left by the Universal Church associated to the Brazilian identity was so strong that it clearly 'contaminated' other religious groups from Brazil, stimulating comparisons and a lack of trust towards them as well. This situation was not restricted to evangelical groups, but also to other segments – from charismatic groups (cf. Gabriel 2010) to the Messianic Church.⁴

People I spoke with frequently recollected news about the denomination that had been broadcast on television involving charges of enrichment by its leaders, and statements from people who felt they had been victims of extortion and fooled by the Universal Church. In different contexts, my interlocutors questioned two factors: the raising of money and the style of Pentecostal worship. We begin with the latter.

The Pentecostal style of worship was highlighted in accusations against the Universal Church. There was perplexity not only in relation to the inflamed tone of voice, characteristic of Pentecostal evangelical preaching in general, but also to the mechanisms of the strong orations conducted in the Universal Church, with its intense participation by the believers. Corporal expressions that marked possession and exorcism reinforced this impression and sparked questioning of the credibility of the ritual, given that it broke with models of corporal practices associated with the dominant religiosity.⁵

The effervescence of the service is seen as a deviation, not only aesthetically, but also of the person, as it could be a sign of some sort of madness. I emphasize that my interlocutors often mentioned 'shouting' as one of the points of antipathy towards the Universal Church. The exaltation of the oration is perceived as an anomaly or deviation – a departure from the individual and sociocultural foundation – in a context where the exercise of religion is directly associated to silence and contained contemplation.

I recall here my experience in Fátima, during the celebrations of the anniversary of the apparition of the Virgin Mary. At that time, the silence practised by the multitude drew my attention. At various times, the silence strongly marked moments in the communication with the transcendent and was identified as a source of sacred experience. In the Catholic dimension, silence, as a sign of respect for the sacred, has important value. In the Sanctuary of Fátima, for example, there are signs that remind the public, in various languages: 'You are entering a place of pilgrimage. Speak softly'; and 'Silence. We are Praying'. In a certain way, within the Catholic logic, the sacred involves silence, or at least, an introverted expression of belief.

By giving visibility to a style of worship in which vigorous prayers and exorcisms are routinely present in the rituals, the Universal Church is alienating itself from Portuguese society, which is accustomed to the routines of the Catholic Church. Even though there are Pentecostal churches in the country, the Portuguese appear not to be familiar with the style of worship in these denominations, given the description that they offer. In this context, the Universal Church draws attention by breaking this apparently homogenous situation,⁶ and presenting a style of worship that emphasizes the simultaneity of voices and, at times, an intensity of sounds.

Money

Tithing is mandatory in the Universal Church, as it is in most Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches. It is God's money, which the believer must return to him. To tithe also implies demonstrating trust in God. In addition to tithing, other amounts are offered to God with a specific goal. The ritual routine of the denomination includes dynamics in which the believer is encouraged to make his or her offerings at the altar, to achieve retribution proportional to the amount offered. These dynamics, within the logic of the denomination, can be considered opportunities given to the believer so that he or she can establish an advantageous relationship with God: to give what one has, and receive in return what one does not have.

In this undertaking, faith – active faith – would be the certainty that moves the believer in his act of sacrifice and would guarantee the desired return. It is through 'active faith' that the believer is capable of moulding his future and transforming the desire into a consummated fact (Kramer 2001; Swatowski 2007). According to Edir Macedo, the founder of the Universal Church, to activate faith is to activate the divine power that

is capable of destroying evil, promoting transformation in life itself and generating practical results. The exercise of faith is directly associated with action, because one who has faith must practise and demonstrate it. To exercise faith includes sacrifices, 'a courageous attitude that shows your faith' (Macedo 1999: 56).

Within the perspective of prosperity, faith is the instrument of the believer, and sacrifice – whose most common materialization is the offering of money – is the first condition for access to the blessings of God. Invested with ritual value, money is the form of sacrifice that places the believer in a cosmic challenge and qualifies him/her to obtain prosperity. In addition to the lack of knowledge of, or a critical interpretation of, the dimension of the ritual use of money, questions arise in relation to the purposes of the collection – suggesting that there is an institutional economic interest behind the ritual strategies.

According to my interlocutors, once again, the media appears as the main source of information about the way of life of the representatives of the institution. The promotion – mainly through local television stations – of the abundance of consumer goods possessed by Edir Macedo and the bishops is frequently mentioned. The lack of transparency and the difficult access for researchers and the media to the Universal Church have allowed the accusations to gain strength, and they wind up reinforcing suspicions about the denomination.

Some researchers emphasize the corporate structure of the Universal Church (Pierucci and Prandi 1996) and the 'commercialization of the sacred' (Oro 1996). Other authors point to an approximation between monetary offers and the logic of modern capitalism upon analysing the insertion of different Pentecostal groups in various contexts (cf. Martin 1995; Ukah 2005). Nevertheless, I agree with Bialecki, Haynes and Robbins (2008) when they write that we should not be limited to a unilateral perspective that emphasizes the presence of a modern capitalist logic among the new Christian groups. They call attention to an anti-modern dimension of Christianity,⁷ as it is the hierarchical relationship that the believer has with the transcendent, and his dependence on that authority.

In the context of the campaigns of the Universal Church, money appears to be inserted in the logic of a gift, as understood by Mauss (1923). As Coleman (2006) indicated, in Pentecostal practices, money assumes the dimension of a present and not a commodity. The offer of money constitutes a practice of externalization of the self (as do words), and because it contains part of the spiritual essence of the donor, it presupposes a return – configuring a new object of universal sacrifice. In a Weberian interpretation, we can say that we live in a world where money and religion occupy differentiated and opposite spheres, as do work and

sex, male and female. The approximation of polarities through events that bring them together is the cause of great estrangement. The delimitation and reification of both poles reinforces the dualism.

Efforts to Reconstruct the Stigmatized Image

Since the episode of the Coliseum of Porto, in 1995, the Universal Church began to give signs that it had reconsidered its actions and strategies in Portugal. With its image strongly shaken and struck with a powerful stigma that became reinforced over time, the growth of the denomination was compromised. The Universal Church appeared to be forced to reconsider its position to be able to remain and grow in Portugal.

In 1996, Portuguese newspapers prominently announced 'the Universal Church's new strategies' (Leite 1996); 'Universal Led by Portuguese Bishop' (Azevedo, Rolim and Robalo 1996). The origin of Carlos Alberto Rodrigues, the son of Portuguese immigrants, born in Brazil, but with Portuguese nationality, was emphasized. Carlos Rodrigues came to Brazil to substitute Bishop João Luiz Urbaneja, who for two years had been responsible for Universal's activities in Portugal.⁸ The newspaper *Público* announced that the new bishop 'sought to introduce a new behaviour in relation to the exterior. In apparent contrast with his predecessor, Carlos Rodrigues displayed a greater tendency for dialogue, [in contrast with] the image of sharp arrogance of João Luís' (Leite 1996: 2). 'Appease and Discuss' would be the grand objective of the new Universal leader in Portugal, who 'has the sense that they are undergoing a delicate moment' (Azevedo, Rolim and Robalo 1996).

In recent years, significant investments in the reformulation of the image of the denomination have been obvious, as well as an effort to approximate with the universe of meanings and values found in the local context. Through studies conducted not only in Portugal but also in other countries, it is known that the Universal Church is attentive to local references and dynamics, and is disposed to undertake translations, and to a certain point, to incorporate particular symbolisms, as we will see below. Nevertheless, what I will try to emphasize here, through the Portuguese case, is the attention of the denomination to the remodelling of its image in the public sphere.

In 2003, the various temples of the Universal Church in Portugal came to be called 'Spiritual Help Centres'.⁹ It is interesting to note that the change to this name suggests an attempt to disassociate the image of the denomination from the pretension of being a church, and indicates it is a location for providing spiritual services. We can analyse the bridge that is

created with so-called ‘new age’ groups, which use the expression ‘spirituality’ in contrast to religion, which is understood as an institution that proposes doctrinaire adhesion. The new name for the Universal place of worship was also close to the new age context because it suggests a connection between therapy and ‘spirituality’.¹⁰ After that, a new change occurred, and since 2013 the word ‘spiritual’ has been removed from the facades, and temples have been renamed ‘Help Centres’, indicating a distancing from the religious dimension and an approximation with the therapeutic dimension, or even social.

Nevertheless, the symbol of the Universal Church (a dove inside a red heart) and the slogan ‘Stop Suffering’ continue to be stamped on the signs of the Help Centres. The slogan indicates a direct contrast with Catholicism and other Christian denominations that theologically consider suffering to be an inevitable destiny of sinners. It indicates the possibility of overcoming the causes of different types of suffering, which take place through meetings dedicated to specific purposes.

In parallel, the Universal Church chose to rename its services, substituting, for example, the expression ‘prosperity chain’ for ‘financial congress’, and more recently for ‘congress for success’. At the same time, the media used by the Universal Church emphasizes lay issues over religious ones, and the print media developed a new layout, replacing a tabloid graphics style with a more sophisticated look.

The changes are significant and lead us to think the UCKG is attempting to distance itself from religious references established in Portugal and a greater approximation with the secular. Recognizing the contemporary trend towards secularization within religions (cf. Oro 1996; Hervieu-Léger 1999), the Universal Church appears to follow this direction.

In addition, the Universal Church’s communication vehicles began to avoid direct attacks on the Catholic Church. In a country where Catholicism is considered a deeply rooted tradition – although criticism of the church is increasingly present, mainly among the younger generations – this retreat does not exactly indicate an end to tensions with the dominant religion, but a new posture in relation to the Catholic imaginary. Far from indicating that it has been intimidated by the established religion, it appears to be a new form of relating with the Catholic dimension.

In this sense, contrasting references to the Catholic Church continue to be more subtly present in the *Folha de Portugal* newspaper and occasionally in the words of the pastors in the temples. In one service in the Templo Maior (Grand Temple), in Chelas, Lisbon, on a Sunday in December 2007, Bishop Alfredo Paulo, the leading representative in the hierarchy of the Universal Church in Portugal, spoke about the campaign

to capture funds for the construction of a cathedral for the denomination in Porto. Upon presenting the fundraising goal – seven million euros – he compared the amount to the cost of building the Church of the Holy Trinity in Fátima, which cost ninety million euros. In his talk, the bishop made clear his displeasure with the privileges that the Catholic Church enjoyed from the government – a constant complaint among minority religious groups in Portugal – and also drew a parallel between the plans of the denomination and the new church in Fátima, inaugurated in 2007 to receive thousands of pilgrims.¹¹

The Universal Church's initiative to build the cathedral in Porto should not only be seen as a necessity because of its expansion plans (given that it had found difficulty in buying new buildings in the larger Portuguese cities), but also as a reform of its strategy to occupy urban space. The project of the Spiritual Help Centre in Porto appears as a type of self-affirmation and consolidation through the insertion in the landscape of a large construction project and in a prominent location. Architecturally, the Spiritual Help Centre is very different from the cathedral built earlier by the Universal Church. It clearly adopted new references. The cathedral in Porto has a contemporary and formal design within a minimalist scope – while the previous constructions, whether in Brazil or in other countries where the Universal Church had built temples – followed a standard that was 'eclectic with neoclassical references' (cf. Gomes 2011).

When examined in parallel to the description of the activities for which the Spiritual Help Centre is destined, the new architectural references adopted for this project suggest a new presentation by the Universal Church in Portugal. The website 'Conte Comigo' (Count on Me), designed for promoting the project and raising funds, reads 'Created to serve and help a variety of people and to solve their problems, this Centre will offer talks, group therapy, seminars and personal, professional, emotional and family counselling'.

The project of the Spiritual Help Centre thus seems to ratify a new presentation and also a new position of the Universal Church, which is more discrete in its action, with fewer contrasts and less tension with the hegemonic, although more competitive. The renovation of strategies adopted by the denomination for insertion in public space in Portugal indicates a greater flexibility in the Universal Church's form of presentation. It suggests an attempt at a definitive distancing from the traditional local Catholic reference, according to which the temple is a space for contemplation and devotion, by proposing the concept of an environment for worship as a place for services, therapies, counselling and self-help. While the shift is significant, it must be seen not only as a conceptual or

architectural option, but also as a possibility for a legal insertion in the gaps of Portuguese law.

According to an article published by the weekly magazine *Visão* (Fillol and Loureiro 2009), which circulates widely in Portugal, the Spiritual Help Centre of Porto was approved by the Porto municipal government as a service building, and more specifically as a place for congresses. According to the article, the design was first presented by a real estate company. It was later purchased by Portuguese and Brazilian investors, who conceded the right to use the space to the Universal Church for nineteen years.

Beyond the details of the transaction, the situation presented by the article suggested that the building was planned considering the restrictions imposed by local regulatory agencies. Knowing that Universal would encounter restrictions if it filed for permits under the religion category in Portugal, and therefore, to achieve legitimacy – whether legally or in the public sphere, dimensions that are completely intertwined – the reformulation of its presentation in public space must be seen as a result of the search for a solution.

Ambiguity of the Reconstruction

We see that the Universal Church has invested in a renovation of its presentation in public space in Portugal. Nevertheless, the construction of a new image does not appear to find significant reverberation. On the one hand, the Universal Church tried to avoid the stigma that impeded its penetration in Portuguese society. On the other, the denomination maintains practices and systems in which the roots of this stigma are supported: the place of money in the cosmology of the Universal Church and the style of worship marked by moments of effervescence. By reformulating its presentation and maintaining its style of worship, cosmology, theology and ritual, the Universal Church has created an ambiguity. Given that style of worship and money are indispensable elements in the neo-Pentecostal dynamic, its effort to create a new presentation has its limits. Universal is not able to free itself of the stigma, which is related to aspects that are constitutive of the very proposal of the denomination. To eliminate them would mean to dissolve itself.

In this context, it is important to examine other mechanisms used by the Universal Church in its attempt to facilitate adhesion to the denomination and its ritual practices. As we will see, the use of dominant references is important in this process.

Ritual Proposals

The Universal Church presents a standardized ritual structure that is organized by different thematic focuses on each day of the week and that is aligned through what it calls currents and campaigns. The currents correspond to uninterrupted participation in a sequence of worship services, on a specific day of the week, according to the intended proposal. The campaigns involve dynamics that transcend the weekly thematic organization. They are periods in which the daily practices gain force when facing specific goals, and in which greater emphasis is given to the notion of sacrifice. Having a theme as its guiding element, the campaigns are moments of greater intensity, when the believer is stimulated to intensify his efforts and his 'active faith' in pursuit of a specific conquest that makes the investment worthwhile.

It is also in the campaigns that the elements that compose the ritual routine of the Universal Church are submitted to some flexibility as a means of sustaining the institutional structure. This characteristic of the denomination was indicated in a study by Clara Mafra (2002) and by researchers who studied the Universal Church in other countries, such as the Ivory Coast (Dozon 2003), Argentina (Semán 2003), France (Aubrée 2003), Mexico (Doran 2003) and South Africa (Corten 2003). It seems important to me, therefore, to verify in what way new elements are aggregated to the ritual structure of the denomination, what dimension they take on and what they indicate in relation to the ritual dynamics promoted by the Universal Church, specifically in the Portuguese context.

During the period in which I accompanied the Universal Church in Portugal, I was impressed by the fact that long walks, such as hikes and climbs, were often part of the ritual agenda of the church. In an environment in which pilgrimage¹² has a strong presence in the religious imaginary and where thousands of people conduct annual pilgrimages to Fátima, it is significant that the denomination incorporates in its programme of vigils, fasts and prayer – which are already common practices – trajectories to be crossed by foot. As an indication of continuity and contrast, the term utilized by the Universal Church to refer to the long journeys on foot is '*caminhada*', or walk. These walks are inserted in the context of the campaigns at moments when the intensity justifies this type of effort.

As discussed above, to achieve the pragmatic results desired by the believers, sacrifice – which is expressed by a monetary offering – became necessary. Until the moment of making the sacrifice, through presentation of the offering during the service on a specific date, different

dynamics are promoted by the church. During the campaign period – which is from when the faithful enter their spiritual battle until the realization of the offering – various ritual elements, objects and practices could be added to this search, such as, in the case in Portugal, the journeys on foot. It is not by chance, that the walks – which at times are actually climbs – are only taken by the leaders of the Universal Church. It is thus an exemplary sacrifice that winds up, among other things, motivating the believers.

The Fogueira Santa – which literally means Holy Fire, but is known as The Campaign of Israel in English – is marked by the pilgrimage of pastors to Israel and is the Universal Church's most highly promoted and important campaign. It is usually held twice a year, and its objective is to have the faithful focus on a large goal, which involves a big change in their lives. In the June 2008 trip, Bishop Alfredo Paulo proposed to climb the highest mountain in the country on seven consecutive weeks, accompanied by other pastors.¹³

The experiences of the walks are rationalized and gain equivalence to the efforts of the faithful who, during the same period, make an effort to accumulate the money to be offered. The reports emphasize the difficulty of the undertaking and the need for the exercise of faith to achieve a destiny, overcoming any obstacles on the way. The idea often emphasized is that it is necessary to struggle for the realization of dreams. That is, to reach a desired destiny, it is necessary to have determination, and to remain firm in the face of obstacles that may arise.

Above all, it was in the mobilization for the construction of the cathedral in Porto, entitled 'The Walk of Faith', that the realization of a long journey gained importance and greater emphasis in the church's routine. Bishops of the denomination active in Portugal left Lisbon (more precisely, from the Templo Maior in Chelas) and walked to Porto, where the construction was being planned, covering approximately 340 kilometres. During the final nine days of 2007, the small group undertook the walk, with a support car, and stopped at the Universal Church's places of worship along the way. Here the walk represented sacrifice in support of the 'concretization of a dream'. During the walk, the bishops prayed for those who had made commitments to support the project and for those who had sent them requests for prayers.

The suffering experienced by the pastors and bishops who did the walks – whether climbing the mountain, or on the 'Walk of Faith' – were emphasized as a form of empowerment for these leaders. Statements from the religious agents emphasized pain, exhaustion, sore feet and difficulties walking. The experience in the face of obstacles and suffering was compared to the pain of Jesus. The completion of the route imbued

the pastors with extra powers and, in the case of the Walk of Faith, was the reason for the realization of a series of events around the same theme, in which were recalled the power of the pastors as well their accomplishment and the purpose of the walk.

Although their difficulty was emphasized and rationalized, the walks or climbs did not substitute the principal sacrifice: the monetary one. The faithful accompanied the temples through the narratives of the pastors, phone calls from the walkers that were broadcast during the services, and by Universal's media. Thus, during their walk, the leaders were accompanied by cameras and by churchgoers. The Walk of Faith was conducted as part of daily activity, in the spiritual battle. The experience of the masses took place through meetings, in which the pastors who remained to conduct the services emphasized another dimension of the walk and sacrifice, to be practised by those present. This was the opportunity for ritual participation. The monetary sacrifice of the faithful became equivalent to the corporal sacrifice of their leaders.

It is possible to establish a parallel with the pilgrimages to Fátima, which normally constitute a way to 'pay back a promise'. In this case the faithful make a contract with Our Lady of Fátima in which a request is made in exchange for a sacrifice. In comparison with the pilgrimage, in which the request is made and after grace is conceded the counter gift is given through the walk, in the campaigns of the Universal Church the sacrifice comes before the concession. The walk or the climb is the result of a promise by the leaders of the denomination to the faithful, who, in turn, realize their contract with God in order to realize their dreams.

It is generally to face significant problems that the sacrifice of the long journey by foot is justified, as indicated by Pedro Pereira (2003) in his study about the pilgrimages to Fátima. Promises to Our Lady of Fátima that call for the pilgrimage by foot as a retribution of a gift are generally made with the expectation of the solution of very important problems, which gives the people strong motivation. They pay, with pain, the pain that was impeded or stopped by the saint and the sacrifice that they propose to fulfil is proportional to the request. The counter gift is the demonstration to the world that the divine being is miraculous and the pilgrimage, therefore, winds up being a validation of this power. Analogously, in the Universal Church campaigns, it is the greater difficulties that should be placed in play. One pastor affirmed: 'If you are one who says: I am at the point that only with God's help ... then for you, only the holy fire of Mt Sinai [The Campaign of Israel].'

If it is possible to trace approximations and to delineate contrasts between the walks conducted by the Universal Church and the pilgrimages to Fátima, it is more important to emphasize the role of these

practices in the proposal of the Universal Church. I would say that these approximations assume the role of mediation. They are not central as a ritual element, but they allow greater involvement of the practitioner with the campaigns. They collaborate to 'awake the faith in people'. They are bridges that establish a connection between dominant local references and the proposal of the denomination.

Final Considerations

The Universal Church's recognition of the stigma that hangs over it implies that it is paying attention to the accusations and making an effort at a consequent repositioning in the public sphere. As in the Brazilian case (Gomes 2009), in Portugal the Universal Church abandoned an 'agonistic strategy' for recognition in public space based on a persecutory theory (Mafra 2002), and adopted a 'strategy of conquest', to use terms employed by Gomes. To do so, the occupation of the buildings purchased or built is an important element. They are buildings that stand out on the landscape because of their splendour and distinction. Within the search for visibility and credibility, the Universal Church in Portugal has sought – within its conventions and their broadening – elements that allow a positive recognition of the denomination. In the case studied, a revised presentation of the denomination itself is established by changing the name of its places of worship and the style of its printed material – elements that compose its public image. In this effort, the Universal Church opted to present, at least partially, a deinstitutionalized imaginary of religiosity and spirituality. At the same time, more ambiguously, it created bridges with various Catholic references. In this effort for a repositioning in the public sphere, the Universal Church sought to walk from the margin to the centre and to achieve legitimacy on a broader scale, which Goffman (1963) would call the manipulation of the deteriorated identity.

At the same time, the Universal Church – which maintains an institutional, centralized and authoritarian hierarchy (cf. Mafra 2002) and a standardized ritual structure – signals its intention to facilitate the assimilation of its project and adopt elements that create a bridge with the local context. Its practices appear to reveal a strategy of action that recognizes the existence of cultural resistance and a problem with the assimilation of the denomination and its message. Thus, the movement of approximation to new references, and the insertion in its campaigns of themes that are broadly shared by the Portuguese public, help to produce the desired mediation. Given the impossibility of juxtaposition, bridges are created. In this way, the Universal Church finds its strategies to face resistances, and

establishes a network centralized in Brazil, but that spreads throughout the Atlantic and beyond.

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Notes

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1. For a discussion about 'reverse mission', see Freston 2010.
2. In the same year, in Brazil, there was an episode that became known as the 'chute na santa', 'the kick to the saint' (Birman 2003). On 12 October 1995, the day of Our Lady Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil, a Universal pastor kicked the image of the saint on a nationally broadcast television programme on Rede Record, to show that the clay image had no sacred value. The scenes were shown repeatedly on Brazil's leading television network, Rede Globo, and had great national repercussion, causing the denomination to withdrawal from this aggressive position.
3. Since 1940, when the Concordata between Portugal and the Vatican was signed, privileges to the Catholic Church, as the official religion, have been made official. In 2001, the Law for Religious Liberty was approved, which presupposed equal rights for all groups, although it established conditions for recognition of other religions. In 2004, a new Concordata was signed, which revised some factors, such as optional religious teaching in both public and private schools.
4. The Messianic Church, founded in Japan in 1935, reached Brazil in 1955, from where missionaries left for other Portuguese-speaking countries. It is characterized by millenarianism, and since 1977 has activities in Portugal. In 1991 it began work in Angola, and in 2000 reached Mozambique.
5. In a phenomenological approach to processes of cure among charismatics in the United States, Csordas (1994) called attention to the relationship between religious practices and corporal practices. In the case of possession, the author indicted that the manifestation of the devil is identified through specific corporal expressions of one who is possessed, in a performative dimension.
6. It is important to highlight that the apparent Catholic homogeneity is permeated by variations in practices and beliefs in the agency of the supernatural (Mafra 2000), which marks popular Portuguese Catholicism, as indicated by Sanchis (1979, 1983) in his study about pilgrimages.
7. Bialecki, Haynes and Robbins (2008) consider Christianity a heterogeneous analytic object behaving in divergent ways in different communities, both as a modern (individualist) and an anti-modern (collective and conservative) force.

8. Carlos Alberto Rodrigues stayed in Portugal for less than one year. After fulfilling his role of calming the polemics over the Universal Church in the media and ending the attacks on the Catholic Church, he returned to Brazil and was substituted by Marcelo Breyner (Rodrigues and Ruuth 1999).
9. The Universal Church adopted this name for its places of worship in many European countries and even in Latin America, indicating a trend that goes beyond the Portuguese context.
10. See, for example, D'Andrea (2000), Hellas and Woodhead (2005), and Maluf (2007).
11. The sanctuary reports that the building, with an 8,600 seating capacity, is not only the largest church in Portugal but in all of Europe.
12. For Vilaça (2008: 55), 'the pilgrimages have contributed both to the revitalization of the traditional religions and to the reproduction of practices of the faithful as to the expression of an individual and privatized religiosity.'
13. On the front page of the *Folha de Portugal* of 8 June 2008, a photo of Pico was placed next to an image of Mt Sinai, indicating the parallel that is established. These climbs were not used to replace the trip to Mt Sinai, but were a form of preparation for a greater sacrifice, given that the trip by a representative of the denomination to Israel – taking with him the names of the believers – constitutes a closing of the process of sacrifice.

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