

The Temple of Solomon and the Creation of an International Community for the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God Members

Leonardo Vasconcelos de Castro Moreira

(PhD Student - Sociology)

University of Warwick

Rua Valins, n° 424, Centro

Postal code: 13860000

Aguai, São Paulo

Brasil.

Abstract

This paper seeks to indicate the relations between the newest global headquarters of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), the Temple of Solomon, with the need of the church to create an international community of members. As we shall observe, main aspects of the theology of this Pentecostal church from Brazil materialize themselves in the symbolism of their new building. The paper uses the example of the capital of Spain, Madrid, to observe how the Temple of Solomon has an important meaning in the preaching even in countries far away from the building. The growth of the church in the past decades around the globe may be explained by the efforts of creating a theological transnational meaning, which resembles in the Temple of Solomon as the UCKG's main tool nowadays.

Keywords: Temple of Solomon; UCKG; transnational's.

1. Introduction

The Temple of Solomon became the new headquarters of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, a church with its birthplace in Brazil, founded in 1977. However, the magnificence and splendor of the temple is not the only reason why the leadership of the church decided to build it. I will observe in this paper the theological motivations of the construction of this mega-temple at a cost of 300 million dollars¹. The biblical interpretation regarding the theme of sacrifice according to the church's message is the most solid argument for the construction of this specific temple, which has a symbolical meaning connected with the prosperity theology preached by the UCKG. The temple became an important place to the millions of members all around the world. The new building is not only a materialization of the UCKG's theology, but a symbolic tool used to unite a disperse group of members spread worldwide as well. Furthermore, using the case of Madrid, in Spain, where I conduct my PhD research, I will argue that the new temple surpassed other practices and symbolic strategies of the church, becoming the most acknowledgeable point in common between all members, even to those who are in countries far from the temple's home country. The building also affected the preaching of bishops and pastors of the church and even the adornments inside doors of other buildings of the UCKG worldwide.

2. The Temple of Solomon and the UCKG's theology

In August 8, 2010, the UCKG started the construction of its new global headquarters: the Temple of Solomon, in the neighborhood of *Brás*, in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. It took almost four years for the inauguration finally happens, in June of 2014. During the time that the temple was been building, it was possible for members of the church or anyone with curiosity to see the construction of the new temple, through cameras installed by the church. The Temple of Solomon is gigantic; it has fifty-five meters of height (around 180 feet) and seats for ten thousand people. To understand the symbolic representation of the Temple of Solomon worldwide for members, first we need to understand the theological message of the church alongside with its transnationalism.

¹ Available in: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/andersonantunes/2014/07/30/god-has-a-new-home-a-300-million-mega-temple-in-sao-paulo/#38a3ccb670ba>. Access: 28/04/2017.

The UCKG is acknowledged as the most important transnational religious enterprise of Brazil for some scholars² (Oro *et al.*, 2003), with almost 200 countries with temples of this religious institution³. The church is considered also as one of the best representations of the Neo-Pentecostalism movement. The main characteristics of this church, theologically speaking, are the spiritual warfare against evil and the prosperity theology (Mariano, 2012; Mariz, 1999), characterized by unstoppable struggle against the devil and poverty, respectively. Moreover, the institutional discourse of the church belongs to what is called as the third wave of Brazilian Pentecostalism⁴. The most important figure of the church is Bishop Edir Macedo, a Brazilian religious leader who started the church in the late 1970s in Rio de Janeiro, who became the central figure within the next years after its settlement. Macedo is a former member of the Church New Life, conducted by the Canadian Pastor Robert McAlister. According to David Lehmann (1996: 122), the rupture of Macedo from his old religious filiation happened because he wanted to popularize the religious message to the poor parts of Rio de Janeiro – especially the suburbs and the favelas –, while McAlister wanted to keep his church more related to the middle and higher classes.

The rupture of Macedo and the goal to get his message to the poorest parts of the city gave birth to a religious message inspired by the evangelicals of the United States like Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts, who preached that health and prosperity could be achieved by faith and praying. Differently from the USA preachers of the prosperity theology, who usually just wanted to sell books or any other religious product on television, the main point of Macedo with the UCKG's preaching on radio and television⁵ is that the people who receive the message would go to the nearest temple of the church. Another differentiation between the UCKG and the preachers from the USA is the adaption of the theology with the spiritual warfare against the Afro-Brazilian religions like *Umbanda* and *Candomblé*. This phenomena was not new in Brazil; it began with other Brazilian Pentecostals leaderships such as David Miranda from the Church God is Love (founded in 1962), and even Robert McAlister, who already fought these entities in his church; nonetheless, with Macedo, the struggle against these religions became sharper⁶. The choice for a deliberate warfare against Afro-Brazilian religions is due to two main reasons. The first one is local; Rio de Janeiro has a tradition with these religions, especially in the favelas. Most of these places were occupied by the descendants or freed slaves during the periods after the abolishing of slavery. Hence, if the most of the people in the favelas were not believers of these religions, at least most of them had a cultural background able to recognize their practices and symbolism. The second one is to avoid a direct conflict with the Catholic Church⁷, which has the largest amount of members in Brazil until today, with around 65% of the total population declaring themselves Catholics. The weaker enemy – the Afro-Brazilian religions – was easier to demonize and to fight against it. Nevertheless, if the church wanted to become global, the warfare should be adaptable to each location where the UCKG wants to be. The UCKG preaches that the demonic forces have national characteristics (Wyk, 2014: 43) and the strategic with the warfare against local religions may vary on its degree of sharpness in each location.

²It is difficult to measure the amount of the church members. First, there is a good amount of members that cannot be considered as regulars. Second, the data varies a lot. The best numbers about the institution in Brazil are made by IBGE (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*) and it showed the church with 1.8 million members in that country in 2010. The church is bigger in Brazil than in any other country so double less than the double of this number would probably be the amount of regular members that the church has worldwide. Numbers in: www.ibge.gov.br. Access: 22/11/2016.

³In: <http://noticias.r7.com/brasil/noticias/expansao-da-igreja-universal-pelo-mundo-ja-atinge-quase-200-paises-20120818.html>. Access: 28/04/2017.

⁴The first wave of Brazilian Pentecostalism started in the 1910s with immigrants from Sweden and Italy and the churches of this period were mostly ascetic towards materialism and believed in the gifts of the Holy Spirit like glossolalia. The second wave started in the 1950s and 1960s and had a focus on the spiritual healing and the introduction of broadcasting preaching, especially by radio. The third wave or Neo-Pentecostalism, where the UCKG fits as the best example, started on the late 1970s and has until today as the main characteristics the remission of practices and costumes, the theology of prosperity and spiritual battle and a huge participation on the public sphere, especially with the television (Freston, 1993: 95; Mariano, 2012: 34).

⁵The UCKG owns many radio stations and television all around the world. The best example is *TV Record*, the second biggest television channel in Brazil.

⁶Macedo has a specific book against Brazilian Spiritism (1988), which includes Kardecism, *Umbanda* and *Candomblé*, to help readers avoid the contact and release themselves from the entities of these religions.

⁷It does not mean that the conflict never happened. Macedo blames the Catholic Church as the responsible for the economic underdevelopment in Latin America (Mariano, 2012: 124). As another example, the case of the kick in the saint in 1995, when the pastor of the UCKG Sérgio Von Helde kicked the patroness of Brazil (Our Holy Lady Mary) in national TV to prove that the image was just a material piece of worship, therefore, a sinful image. The kick of Von Helde outraged many Catholics in the country and Macedo had to remove him from the leadership and from the church's television shows.

The main point of the theology of the UCKG that directs it to the construction of the Temple of Solomon is the prosperity theology and its sacrificial characteristic regarding money. The UCKG leaders understand that every business made or money acquired by a member should pay a tithe to the church of 10% (Macedo, 2008: 116). Nevertheless, if one challenges God (Macedo, 2008: 161) he or she will receive a bigger blessing. The UCKG believes in the pact between God and men from the Old Testament, when Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden and had everything they need. After the decay of men when both ate the forbidden fruit, the pact was dismantled. Nonetheless, it did not cease for those who believe and act according with the Holy Spirit (Macedo, 2005). There is a possibility of restoration of this pact, with a life without diseases and bankruptcy, which most of the times are considered as satanic work⁸. The only way to restore it is to act as the church preaches with a fully devotedly supernatural faith. Furthermore, the members should not have any doubt regarding the word of God, or otherwise it will not work (Macedo, 2008: 86). The faith has to be sacrificial, which means that someone has to give everything possible to the church, in order to maintain and enlarge the work of God in the world. If someone sacrifices with a truly deeply faith, God must restore the pact and give blessings back – including material ones. During the church most famous campaign, called the Holy Fire of Israel, members are invited to sell cars and properties to donate all the money of the sells to the church. This process is never compulsory, but one of the most important things for the pastors are the testimonies given about the changes that a sacrifice can provide to the members, which only happens with this kind of action. The only way to have a real shift in life is by this fully devotion and absolute faith in God's payback; however, not everyone has the money to sacrifice, but the church gives other options for a member to show his/her engagement.

Bishop Macedo (2001: 24-25) distinguishes three kinds of sacrifices that are important to the church. The first one is the physical work sacrifice or the evangelization; this kind of sacrifice is related to the social work in poor neighborhoods, where the members, usually the assistants⁹, headed by a pastor, pray in public and offer non-perishable food to the people in need. This is also a strategy to spread the institutional message and to tout new members. The second one is the spiritual sacrifice; this is for members who do not have the time for the first one, but still want to participate with prayers and fasting¹⁰ following the church's recommendations. The third one, which is the most important in the understanding of the symbolism of the Temple of Solomon, is the financial sacrifice; this is how the church will be able to provide the preaching by the media and will be able to build temples in places where the leaders of the church think it is plausible. Macedo observes the last sacrifice as a way of people who are not able to serve the church in other forms, to help in the salvation of the outsider's souls. Nonetheless, everybody in the church is encouraged to make all the sacrifices, especially the financial one. These sacrifices, when made, are the best way for a member to show that his or her life is on the altar – a common saying of the preachers, which represents the fully engagement of someone with the institutional guidelines.

3. Why the Temple of Solomon?

In the first book of Kings in the Old Testament, Solomon receives his nomination as a king directly from his father, King David, after a political struggle for the throne with his brother Adonijah. The main characteristics of Solomon in the Bible are his wisdom, wealth and achievements as a political administrator. However, for the UCKG prosperity theology, the real importance lies on how Solomon became the wealthiest and arguably the smartest character in the Holy Scriptures. A video¹¹ showing Solomon's wealth and blessings was played at a night service on 13th of July 2016, a Monday night – reserved for service of financial restoration of the members – at the headquarters of the church in Spain¹², in Madrid.

⁸ Sometimes it is hard to understand what is Satan acting in someone's life or what is a probation of God to the church's theology, even for someone – like me – who is studying it for a few years. The best differentiation that I got came from a young pastor in the headquarters of the church in Madrid, Spain. He said that everyone have hard times in life, nonetheless, if a problem sticks for too much time, the probabilities of the work of Satan are high.

⁹ Those are the members higher in the hierarchy than the regular ones. They usually wear uniforms and help inside doors with blessings while the pastor or bishop is close to the altar and even with the cleaning and organization of events. They also have the outside work of evangelization regularly distributing flyers of forthcoming services.

¹⁰ There are specific times in the year for fasting. Between May and June of 2016, the UCKG made worldwide a campaign called the Fasting of Daniel. Every member received recommendations to not eat by night and avoid non-spiritual thinking and conversations during twenty-one days.

¹¹ Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZuDkLelzUI>. Access: 28/04/2017.

¹² The church changes its name of registration in many places. In Madrid and in many other locations the church is registered as *Comunidad Cristiana del Espíritu Santo*, which also happens in countries like Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, México, Peru and Colombia (Oro *et al.*, 2003: 51). Nonetheless, the church uses and it is most acknowledged by the name of *FamiliaUnida*.

The main objective of the video was the demonstration of how wealthy Solomon was in comparison with the richest men alive today; the conclusion was that he had five times more money than the five hundred wealthiest men have in nowadays. After the video, the pastor who oversaw the service that day explained very clearly how Solomon got so wealthy according to the Bible and the answer was sacrifice. The sacrifice made by Solomon after he built the Temple of Yahweh was gigantic, twenty two thousand cows and one hundred and twenty thousand sheep (I Kings 8, 63). The huge amount of animals sacrificed was the reason why Solomon became the wealthiest man of his time. To be the richest, one should sacrifice the most. This discourse aligned with the meritocracy of neoliberal times had an influence in Brazilian society. Perhaps this is the main reason why the prosperity theology won the symbolic battle against other theologies more focused on social service without the preaching of a personal struggle for wealth¹³ and made other Pentecostal churches adapt their own religious message to the idea of prosperity.

4. The Temple and the creation of an international community: The Madrid's case

The Temple of Solomon became an important place for the members of the UCKG worldwide to visit; regular excursions are scheduled and the Temple receives foreign visitors, which is widely reported in the official newspaper of the church in Brazil, the *Folha Universal*¹⁴. The information of these visits gives the church the characteristic of a global entrepreneurship for its members in Brazil, providing to them a proof of how the church's religious campaigns are capable to spread the institutional message of salvation by touting new members in other parts of world. The materialization of their financial sacrifices with the broadening of the church has an active participation of the members; they are the shareholders of the word of God. Money fills itself with a religious meaning when becomes the element that connects the members with the church's expansion in the battle against evil. In Madrid, the symbolic meaning of the Temple of Solomon is very similar, but with a few more implications. Most temples of the UCKG in the city have the wallpaper with the image of the Temple of Solomon in the most visible place of the church, the altar. Nonetheless, the Spanish case is not unique. A documentary made by the UCKG to show its insertion in Europe since the beginning of 1990s, has images of the interior of the temples with the same wallpaper with the figure of the Temple of Solomon on the altar, like Belgium, France, Netherlands, Russia and Sweden¹⁵. In an afternoon service at the Spanish headquarters of the church, next to Atocha Station, in 29 of July 2016, the pastor said during his preaching that all the pastors of that church would wake up early in the morning to connect themselves on the internet¹⁶ and pray with the pastors and bishops of the Temple of Solomon. These online-connected prayers are quite common, since it shows the engagement of the local pastors with the most sacred place of the church since its recent inauguration. To the regular members and assistants, the building gives a sense of belonging to a holy and wealth place where miracles and testimonies of big life changes are common. The example of a Brazilian female assistant that works in Madrid, with more than thirty years¹⁷ as a member, gives a general idea of what the new temple represents to the usually economically lower class members of the church. According to her, in one of our many talks, she was in the inauguration of the Temple of Solomon, which had the presence of many important and prestigious people for the Brazilian society, like the former president Dilma Rousseff. The assistant praised herself to have the possibility of sitting near people like the president. She also said that the church in Madrid already organized a trip to the temple in Brazil as well.

The pastors and bishops in Madrid use videos with testimonies of miracles in all aspects of life – mostly in relation to health, wealth and relationships – recorded in the Temple of Solomon. One of the testimonies¹⁸, which is a common practice of publicizing the transformations made by faith, recorded in the Temple of Solomon had a young woman who acknowledged the benefits of going to the temple in the sessions of the therapy of love – a specific religious service for those who need improvements in their sentimental lives. This made her situation of agony go away by accepting that God was preparing someone for her.

¹³ The most recognizable theology that competed with the prosperity theology was the theology of liberation, Catholic theology, which focused on the poor people, especially with social services.

¹⁴ The newspaper usually has a full page or more about the church's international missions.

¹⁵ Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1budWDvx4Ho&t=1124s>. Access: 28/04/2017.

¹⁶ The religious online services of the church are innumerable, going from famous bishops and pastors blogs with theological information to an online pastors help center for people in need.

¹⁷ Since the church started its activities in Madrid in 1992, the female assistant conversion occurred in Rio de Janeiro, around 10 years sooner.

¹⁸ The testimony was given in the night of October 27, 2016.

The pastor in charge of the service in Madrid said after the testimony that the temple was built to make miracles and the same spiritual power of the building in Brazil was present at the church in Madrid. The Temple of Solomon shares its charisma, as a holy place, with all the UCKGs around the world through these videos. Through a marketing perspective – as Leonildo Campos (1999) made in an early period of the construction of the temple –, the Temple of Solomon can be seen also as a form of propaganda for non-members. Campos observed the UCKG as the most adaptable religious enterprise in Brazil in relation the changeable and competitive market of religious goods. However, since the church is more internationalized today than in the 1990s, with a number close to two hundred countries with official temples¹⁹, touting members from different locations and cultural backgrounds became something recurrent for the UCKG. A common place for all of them to visit or just acknowledge as a holy symbol, helps in the creation of a globalized social identity.

It is worth to remember that despite the Temple of Solomon became the most important tool for the creation of an international community of members today, it is far from being the only strategy of the UCKG to reach this objective. In July of 2016, a campaign with oil from Miami, wine from Portugal and water from Cape Verde happened in Madrid. The pastors of these places blessed the elements, which are commonly used to anoint the members of the church, since they have important usages in the biblical narratives. The leaderships of the church usually travel to sacred biblical places like the Mount Sinai – also used as a wallpaper in a few temples in special occasions – and record these peregrinations to show their prayers in the temples and television shows of the church for the members all around the world. The aim to create an international community linked by the UCKG is a strategic move in relation to the great competition for members in the Pentecostal movement and other religions in general. Furthermore, with the status of an international church, the UCKG also tries to keep the number of members' evasion the minimum as possible, since immigrants are constantly associated with the church, especially in the wealthiest countries and they need to attend those people after they migrate. As examples, in Spain, the former bishop in charge for the church said that around 60% or more of their members were immigrants²⁰ and in the United States, the city of New York had in 2012 more temples preaching in Spanish (eleven) than in English (eight)²¹. The immigrants can be of two kinds in these places, the first one is the immigrants who had a previous knowledge of the church or were actually members of it in other places; these are the ones that the church most provide a religious apparatus and a continuation of their religious affiliation. The second one are people who were benefited from the social services of the church or had been touted by the proselytism of the members (including assistants and pastors), when they do the leafleting outside doors and in poor neighborhoods or even by the church's media.

Another visible characteristic of Pentecostalism since its beginning is the primitivism, which is important to understand the creation of a globalized identity by the UCKG. The definition of primitivism relates itself with the huge inclination of Pentecostalism towards the characters and narratives of the Old Testament (Campos, 1999: 350; Wacker, 2003:12). In the case of the UCKG, this phenomena is visible in the books wrote by Bishop Macedo, as for example in *Aliança com Deus* (2005) where the pact of men with God is explained through two hundred pages talking mostly about the Old Testament, with just the last few pages talking about Jesus. Moreover, the temple resembles on a symbolic construction of the Old Testament and has an appeal with all other Pentecostals not only with its greatness – which is a powerful marketing tool as well – but also in relation to their historical imaginary, since it represents the ancient past of wealth from the followers of God. A recently converted member receives a new historical background even if he or she has a previous knowledge of the Old Testament. The interpretation of the wealth of Solomon by sacrifice gives a theological root and a new history based on the possibility for social ascension in the competitive and globalized world of nowadays.

The construction of the Temple of Solomon materialized the theological interpretations of sacrifice aligned with the prosperity theology of the UCKG. It also brought a biblical based history and a place to every member of the church all around the world to acknowledge as holy.

¹⁹ Available in: <http://noticias.r7.com/brasil/noticias/expansao-da-igreja-universal-pelo-mundo-ja-atinge-quase-200-paises-20120818.html>. Access: 28/04/2017.

²⁰ Available in: <http://www.noticiacristiana.com/sociedad/sectas/2008/10/pare-de-sufrir-se-presenta-ahora-en-espana-con-el-nombre-de-familia-unida.html>. Access: 28/04/2017.

²¹ The information is in the church's documentary called *Raio-X da IURD*. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJN99ypn3CM>. Access: 28/04/2017.

An international Pentecostal church like the UCKG, which deals with people from different cultural backgrounds and geographical locations, needs all available means to congregate their members towards a common identity. The new temple of the church in Brazil is its biggest endeavor trying to gather the members towards a common symbol worldwide.

5. Conclusion

The UCKG is an internationalized church, which needs to deal with people from countless countries in a daily basis. The necessity to create a discourse theologically based on both national and international scenarios is a key strategy to this church. To become part of a borderless community, where people can dislocate without losing the benefits of the Holy Spirit provided by the church, a common place for everyone to connect with, is the chosen strategy to enhance the members' attachment to the institution. Nevertheless, this is not the only strategy of the church; the specific campaigns, traveling to holy biblical places, the usages of symbolic elements blessed on other churches locations, testimonies from other parts of the world and the focus on Bishop Macedo as their leadership are other examples of the goal of making members spiritual citizens of the world. However, with the construction of the Temple of Solomon a brand-new building with a symbolic meaning for one of the church's most important theological guidelines – the sacrifice – was brought into equation in a new and much highlighted form. Therefore, the new temple became the most recognizable and highlighted tool for the creation of an international community of UCKG members since its construction in 2014.

6. Bibliography

- Campos, L. (1999). *Teatro, templo e mercado - organização e marketing de um empreendimento neopentecostal*. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes.
- Freston, P. (1993). *Protestantes e política no Brasil: da Constituinte ao impeachment*. PhD Dissertation. Campinas: Unicamp.
- Lehmann, D. (1996) *Struggle for the spirit: religious transformation and popular culture in Brazil and Latin America*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Macedo, E. (2005). *A aliança com Deus*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gráfica Universal Ltda.
- (2001). *O perfeito sacrifício*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gráfica Universal Ltda.
- (2008). *O poder sobrenatural da fé*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gráfica Universal Ltda.
- (1988). *Orixás, caboclos e guias: deuses ou demônios?* Rio de Janeiro: Universal Produções.
- Mariano, R. (2012). *Neopentecostais: sociologia do novo pentecostalismo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola.
- Mariz, C. (1999) *A teologia da batalha espiritual: uma revisão da literatura sócio-antropológica*. *Revista brasileira de informação bibliográfica em ciências sociais*. Rio de Janeiro: Vol 47, p. 33-48.
- Oro, A., P., Corten, A., Dozon, J.-P., (orgs.). (2003). *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus - Os novos conquistadores da fé*. São Paulo: Paulinas.
- Stevenson, W. H. (ed.) (1994). *King James Bible: a selection*. New York: Longman Publishing.
- Wacker, G. (2003). *Heaven below: early pentecostals and American culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wyk, I. (2014). *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa: a church of strangers*. New York: University of Cambridge Press.