

**The Diaspora of Brazilian Religions** edited by Cristina Rocha and Manuel Vásquez, Brill: Boston, 2013, xiv + 391 pp. ISBN 9789004236943, \$189 (hardback)

**A Church of Strangers: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa** by Ilana van Wyk, Cambridge University Press: New York, 2008, 306 pp. ISBN 9781107686250, \$34.99 (paperback)

It is no longer surprising to observe that the forces propelling globalization in religion are coming from Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The export of Hindu and Buddhist ideas and practices to the West is well known (Altglas 2014) and for some time even the globalization of religious strands originating in the countries of the North Atlantic, notably Pentecostalism, have been re-exported from those regions, reinvigorated and redesigned by missionaries and migrants from the Philippines, Africa, and Latin America. West African countries are represented in Europe by Ghanaian and Nigerian churches (Haar 1998, Haar 1998, Hunt and Lightly 2001); Zimbabweans in England attend the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (Maxwell 2006). These Pentecostal re-exports build congregations of immigrants from their countries of origin.

As they travel, bundles of ritual, credo, life support, and communal ties are combined and permuted. Western Hinduism takes on a life of its own disconnected from the temples and customs frequented and practised by immigrants from Asia; mosques in the West gather people apparently with little regard for ancestral particularisms. Jews when they travel look for a synagogue like the one they attend or attended back home – Ashkenazi, Sephardi, North African, Halabi (from Syria), Reform, Progressive, Gay, Cool, Egalitarian, etc. Catholics can find the mass in Polish, Spanish, and other languages all over the world, but the liturgy has to be the same.

While migration clearly figures prominently in any account of religion and globalization, it works in many different ways and it is changing. We observe predominantly immigrant congregations attracting people born or originating in many different countries, and we can also see migrant churches and pastors attracting non-migrants to their congregations.

Evidently, then, multiple factors are required to describe – let alone interpret – religious globalization in general. One approach to understanding might be to isolate one factor and see how the others vary. One could take an immigrant population from a particular country and study it across a European city; one could look for variations across groups of differing origins in one place and follow one religious strand or tradition, for example, Muslims in an English city from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and West Africa.

Cristina Rocha and Manuel Vásquez have hit on a version of this approach, by assembling numerous studies of the diaspora of Brazilian religions, though the cases are drawn from all over the world. They could be said, in a loose way, to ‘hold the Brazil variable constant’, and then use 14 case studies to discover if ‘Brazil’, with all the diversity, dynamism and hybridity of its religious field, has a distinctive contribution to make within what they call the polycentric cartography of religious globalization. Does the global projection of this religious field, which can resemble a

microcosm of globalization in itself, tell us something special about Brazil, about religion, or about the way in which religious practices cross boundaries both within and across nations?

In their book we follow Brazilian Pentecostalism to Europe and Africa, we follow *umbanda* to Argentina and Uruguay, and we follow charismatic Catholicism to the global mediaspace. Those are the cases which I regard as most convincing, by which I mean that they have a degree of institutional continuity and are not excessively reliant on one individual or a very small group. The *Canção Nova* organization combines a high degree of internal discipline with a global mediatic vocation to spread the Catholic charismatic word. (I recently discovered that they have set up their media centre in Jerusalem.) The Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal Churches mentioned are likewise highly institutionalized. The *umbanda* celebrants in Buenos Aires and Montevideo have established associations and link up with longstanding Brazilian *umbanda* networks and centres (*terreiros*). Apart from these there are various, much more tenuous, operations dependent on the personal authority of particular individuals and on (to me) quirky New Age elaborations, which are more ephemeral and whose followers also seem ephemeral. Here the Brazilian element may be likewise incidental; the protagonists knit together elements from *umbanda* or from the dangerous Santo Daime cult, practice healing or therapy, and offer counselling for financial problems, but for the social scientist interpretation is very difficult because the operation depends so much on one individual and because the phenomenon does not fit into a pattern. Here I refer to the healing practised by ‘John of God’ (Cristina Rocha), the Umbanda Temple in Montreal (Deirdre Meintel and Annick Hernandez), and the ad hoc mixing of Japanese and Brazilian motifs, heroes, legends, and entities in rituals practised by Brazilians of Japanese descent migrating ‘back’ to Japan (Ushi Arakaki). In these cases, as in the unabashed syncretism of the Valley of the Dawn in Georgia (USA), the priorities or interests of individuals or very specific groups seem to offer a simpler road to interpretation than theories of religion. There may also be a problem of credibility of witnesses: the article on the Valley of Dawn by Vásquez and José Claudio Souza Alves is admirable in its reproduction of the story, but I was a little taken aback when I read that the original Valley (near Brasilia) ‘claims’ 250,000 followers and a temple in Cambridge, England: I lived in Cambridge as a Latin Americanist for almost 40 years—I think I might have heard of it, but I didn’t. In these and other situations ethnographers have a genuine dilemma whether to believe the claims of informants—not least when it comes to healing, which figures quite prominently in several of the cases.

The chapters quoted so far are admirable for their detail but hard to fit into an analytical framework of globalization. Such a framework could be divided into a series of dimensions all conceived in relation to the idea of frontier crossing. They would, in no particular order, be: organization; ritual, symbolic and imaginary projections; authenticity; the role of the migrants.

If we start with organization we see that the cases studied in the remaining chapters cover a variety of ways in which the relationship between leadership in Brazil and branches or followers across the world is maintained. The big contrast is between those where a centralized command is buttressed by global control of resources and those in which there is a single locus of legitimacy and respect but it is not backed by a control of material resources. The examples of the former are the two

neo-Pentecostal churches which figure in separate chapters—the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and the Igreja Pentecostal Deus é Amor (Pentecostal Church ‘God is Love’)—and Canção Nova, which is dedicated to devotional activity as well as to mediatic diffusion of the charismatic word. Examples of the latter are the *umbanda* cults that pay obeisance to leaders in Brazil but are often in conflict about what this means or what obligations it places upon them. Nevertheless, their ‘system’ is based on the original Brazilian ‘system,’ and such disagreements are not unusual in Brazil itself.

So we can see that managing resources across frontiers varies and that the management of symbolic resources is a delicate matter: in Portugal a series of *umbanda* or *candomblé* organizations have been created, some bearing the name of ‘parent’ bodies in Brazil, which generally are known to have little authority beyond their leaders’ own *terreiros* (Saraiva). Yet Brazil’s ‘*cultos-Afro*’ retain a Brazilian ‘brand’ or ‘image’ across the world—even though their practices are evidently intermingled with local ones—as the Japanese case study describes. When religion mixes the supernatural with powers of healing then this kind of *métissage* is almost inevitable, since every culture has a heritage of such practices and they are of their nature not governed either by elaborate theologies or by institutionalized recognition and induction. The salience of esoteric knowledge ensures that authority has to remain personal in these *cultos*.

But how then has the classic Pentecostalism of small chapels, which still remains quantitatively much larger than the high-profile neo-Pentecostal empires, achieved such a high degree of iteration across frontiers without a centralized authority or control of resources? This is a big question, but it begs the slightly smaller question behind this book, namely whether there is anything specifically Brazilian about this diaspora.

The next question concerns how ritual, symbolism, and imagery travel across frontiers. Here the contrast between Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal is blurred because both seem to be able to conduct a seemingly contradictory dual strategy: they denounce local cults, especially Afro-Brazilian religious practices, as the work of the devil, planting evil and misfortune in the lives of people, yet they also feed into the fears and images that have been deployed by those cults since time immemorial. Cognitive science has cast much light on the evolutionary basis of these phenomena (Boyer 2001, Atran 2003, Lehmann 2005, Cohen 2007). The analysis by Alejandro Frigerio, applying the concepts of frame alignment and frame transformation, marks an extremely valuable contribution to the understanding of these transfers: Latin American religious culture is populated by a ‘multiplicity of spiritual beings’ who, when suitably propitiated, come to the aid of individuals in their daily lives. This provides a smooth entry point for the ‘spiritual help’ offered by *umbanda* priests or related healers and advisers. However, if an individual is to be drawn in deeper than a transient relationship like that of a patient or client, then much more assiduous work is required, building on the initial ‘bridge.’

But if the thousands of testimonies are to be believed, neo-Pentecostal churches also seem to bring about a crisis-induced change without such intimate involvement. On the contrary, what is so striking is the anonymity of their engagement with the lives of their followers. This is something that hardly allows for

the kind of intense personal attention implied by ‘frame transformation.’ In this collection we have an account of the Universal Church’s varying approaches and we see how in Portugal and Angola its leaders were quite flexible in shifting their practices to accommodate local sensitivities. These were mostly about marketing and branding, though, not about the core activity of encouraging self-confidence and fighting the demons within. (I believe that the Angolan government expelled the Universal Church from the country, but it may well have subsequently returned.)

The high profile of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God has overshadowed the Deus é Amor Church even though the latter is also a very interesting example of neo-Pentecostalism. Deus é Amor (‘God is Love’) has been in existence since 1962, predating the Universal Church by some 17 years. The model is again highly centralized and uniform, with a strong emphasis on prosperity and the evil that comes from association with possession cults. In Brazil its distinctive feature is a tight concentration on the very poor and the elderly, in contrast to the Universal Church, which has a broader base but with a tilt towards the *emergentes*—the aspiring lower middle class looking to ‘make it’ notably by building up small businesses. In *The Diaspora of Brazilian Religions* a very good paper by a Brazilian author (Dario Paulo Barrera Rivera) on the Deus é Amor in the Peruvian capital Lima describes the fit between the miracle cures and direct access to divine inspiration offered by the church and the offering of ‘traditional’ healers and shamans—but with a difference: Pentecostalism, preached with an indispensable Brazilian accent, enabled the Church to distance itself from the ‘stigma’ that affects Peru’s own shamans and other indigenous purveyors of the supernatural. It is another case of Frigerio’s ‘frame realignment’: the replacement of a clandestine practice associated with a despised indigenous heritage by a routinized, almost bureaucratic, practice linking followers to a global organization. But there remain many mysteries: why would they trust a big bureaucracy rather than the familiar local shaman, especially when they have to keep up their weekly dues to the church on pain of being excluded from the weekly ‘Holy Supper’ (*Santa Ceia*) where they share bread and wine? The account of the Universal Church in South Africa described below may shed light on this.

This book brings together a wide range of studies which illustrate the extraordinary fertility of Brazilian symbolic and ritual devices as they rotate through different cultural spaces and are resignified according to different cosmologies and interests. Whether this is peculiarly Brazilian remains a matter of debate, though maybe not of great importance. We should be grateful to the editors for making available material which otherwise would not be readily accessible, though in the light of its variety and of the high price of the book, it is disappointing that the publishers did not see it fit to include an index.

We come now to the book by Ilana van Wyk on the Universal Church in South Africa. The projection of entelechies of self-realization and spiritual calm across cultural frontiers born by these highly centralized and impersonal organizations poses a serious challenge to our interpretation of contemporary religion: it is difficult to undertake an ethnography of them because they are very secretive and instil among their staff and volunteers a strong distrust of outsiders, especially journalists (which includes anthropologists). Although Brazilian social scientists have done studies with Universal Church members (Birman 1996, Birman 1997, Birman 1998, Gomes 2011), they have not been able to penetrate church organization. It has therefore fallen to a

South African anthropologist to produce what is certainly the best study of it so far , and in it she does confront its focus on the powers of evil and on the pursuit of prosperity by the church and its followers—and by the former at the expense of the latter. If the editors of the *Diaspora* volume had known of her work, a paper by her would certainly have enriched their book. Although her research started in 2004 and stretched over some two years, the analysis has since developed, and what started as a local case study has become a major contribution to the international literature on neo-Pentecostalism and its manipulation of the supernatural in daily life.

One of the distinctive features of the Universal Church in Brazil has been its noisy campaign against the demonic forces embodied in the possession cults (*cultos Afro*), which are a prominent feature of the country's heritage, frequented by people from all social strata and indeed with all sorts of religious affiliations. But the struggle against these forces strikes even deeper chords in South Africa, where the fear of sorcery, especially apparently within Zulu culture, is incomparably more pervasive and has a much more profound and poisonous effect on social relationships, especially within the family. Van Wyk's accounts of the fears people have of spells being cast upon them, especially by family members, provide a sobering insight into the tensions that plague their lives. Brazilian family life has serious problems especially among the urban lower income strata, but they are rarely compounded by such acute fear and tension derived from the handling of the supernatural.

Indigenous cults in South Africa prescribe elaborate ritual procedures to combat the forces of evil, but followers of the Universal Church are told this is a perpetual spiritual war that they can never win. In contrast to indigenous officiants like shamans, the Church tells its followers ritual procedures are of no help: only the Church's pastors can help, with their improvised imprecations, and even then only temporarily. To get enduring help followers have to contribute to the Church. In a manner reminiscent of the evangelicals described by Joel Robbins in New Guinea , the Church discredits powerful South African beliefs about the need to appease ancestors so that luck can flow from them, its pastors say the ancestors themselves are demons. In South Africa, however, loud imprecations against demonic forces are considered very dangerous, if only because they reveal to others that a person knows where the demons are hiding, thus inviting retaliation, so the pastors of the Universal Church, challenging and provoking local supernatural entities in their customary manner, make a point of yelling out their names. It is the same strategy of symbolic confrontation they use in Brazil (Birman and Lehmann 1999).

Yet at the same time—again as in Brazil—the Church capitalizes on indigenous cultural traits, for example the idea that a person can contaminate others through her bodily fluids, or that a curse can be communicated and inflicted by semen or blood and even by a touch. This is countered by church assistants (*obreiros* in Brazil) who anoint, sometimes invasively and painfully, parts of the body which discharge these dangerous fluids, in imitation of procedures conducted by indigenous healers who can ‘seal’ openings in the body through which demons may enter.

Coming to the organization of the church, van Wyk describes ‘a Ministry rife with internal tension, petty squabbles and macho posturing’ (p. 84). At the bottom of the hierarchy the assistants are themselves beholden financially to the Church: unlike pastors, they do not receive any payment but have to buy their own uniforms from the

church at a price of US\$155. Quite frequently the women among them—who are the majority—hope to capture a Brazilian pastor for a husband, regarded as more reliable than the men they meet in their daily lives, but the Church does not allow such mixing and discourages courtship among members, warning them that the devil too may be present in Church.

In South Africa as in Brazil, outsiders decry the Universal Church as a money-making machine that exploits the vulnerability or gullibility of its followers to extract from them a regular tithe plus extra donations. Certainly the Church, and not least its supreme leader Edir Macedo, have amassed enormous fortunes. Social science has shied away from explaining this phenomenon of giving, which is present in less spectacular ways in all Pentecostal churches: we are inhibited from branding the followers as naïve or lacking in agency – which might seem patronizing on our part – and our disciplinary formation inclines us to lend credence to the idea that the followers are receiving something in exchange for their generosity or that their miserable material conditions predispose them to making desperate bets even when all the evidence is that they never gain anything. We are nonplussed by an organization that successfully calls on its followers to ‘give what you have not got.’ Van Wyk confronts these questions head-on, criticizing anthropologists like Jean Comaroff either for their ‘macro-level’ economic explanations that reduce the church body to a ‘flattened and predictable’ membership (Comaroff 2009) or for their inability to cope with Christianity as their discipline’s ‘repressed other.’ In other words, we are trapped in a secularist outlook that cannot accept the religious content of behaviour as susceptible of rational explanation. (Rational choice approaches in the style of Stark and his followers specifically exclude the religious content of behaviour from their analyses, treating church membership like membership of any secular community (Lehmann 2010). Van Wyk views the contribution of money to the Church as one aspect of a struggle by followers to detach themselves from the very tangible threatening forces at work in their family relationships: by getting to grips with sacrifice and even acting cruelly towards their family members—for example taking money reserved for school fees and giving it to the church—they are painfully aware that they face real threats from demons but also believe that the God portrayed by the Church offers real opportunities.

Tithing and keeping away from family involved in witchcraft is a test for followers—and they then, in turn, put God to the test; that is they test God to keep a promise that if they fill his storehouse with tithes he will ‘throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it’ – a quotation from the minor Prophet Malachi 3:10 (p. 119). They have a sense of being involved in a test of their faith and they, in turn, encouraged by the church, then make exaggeratedly large offerings and expect even larger benefits.

In conclusion, these two books tell us a great deal—about Brazil, about globalization, about South Africa, about the unique ritual and even psychological manipulation practiced by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, and about contemporary religious trends. About Brazil we learn that the country has given birth to a number of highly distinctive religious organizations and strands and that many of these have been exported to other parts of the world, usually taking with them a tinge of exoticism and sometimes also of authenticity. Certainly, its religious exports far ‘outperform’ those of any other Latin American country in variety as well as quantity,

though why this should be remains unanswered. About globalization we learn again that religious symbols and rituals can cross cultural, political, and geographical frontiers with consummate ease and are not only borne by migration. About South Africa we learn that family life in its big cities is often very tormented and that a confrontational religious organization can play on that distrust. The Universal Church has a worldwide formula for this which seems to go as follows: in the place of the opaque exchange relationship with intermediaries like shamans and witches, the Church offers a prospect of solutions to a person's problems and a realization of their most cherished material desires so long as they enter into a pact not with the Devil but with a divine being at once benign and voracious. That being (I hesitate to say 'God') has to be challenged or tested by the individual making ever greater sacrifices and in parallel feeling ever more guilty that the sacrifices are insufficient, as well as overriding other obligations, notably those of their family. It can be seen as an variation on the classic 'pact with the Devil'. The Universal Church trains its preachers to play on this guilt complex very skilfully: 'no you are not obliged to give, the Church is a place to relieve your suffering and its help is for free' but at the same time, 'if you yourself want to receive then you have to give' and God is just waiting to be challenged.

About contemporary religion we learn from these books that it is important to listen and to avoid explanations of religious behaviour that do not pay careful attention to what the participants are saying and to what lies behind their words. In this last respect I believe that van Wyk's book bears very favourable comparison with Sabah Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood 2005). Like the Universal Church, the path of ultra-observant Islamic renewal followed by a small number of mostly middle class Cairo women studied by Mahmood poses a challenge to sociology's heritage of secularism and rationalism. But whereas Mahmood then turns her case study into a warhorse for the pursuit of North American or European feminist agendas, van Wyk is prepared to listen and let the reason of the other play itself through.

David Lehmann  
*University of Cambridge (U.K.)*  
E-mail address: [adl1@cam.ac.uk](mailto:adl1@cam.ac.uk)

## References

- Altglas, Véronique (2014). From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage. New York, OUP.
- Atran, Scott (2003). In Gods we trust: the evolutionary landscape of religion. New York, OUP.
- Birman, Patricia (1996). "Cultos de possessão e pentecostalismo no Brasil; Passagens." Religião e Sociedade 17(1-2): 90-108.
- Birman, Patricia (1997). Males e malefícios no Discurso Neopentecostal. In O Mal, a cultura e as religiões populares. ed. P. Birman, R. Novães and P. Crespo. Rio de Janeiro, EdUERJ.

Birman, Patricia (1998). "Feminine mediation and Pentecostal identities." Cambridge Anthropology 20(3): 66-83.

Birman, Patricia and David Lehmann (1999). "Religion and the media in a battle for ideological hegemony." Bulletin of Latin American Research 18(2): 145-164.

Boyer, Pascal (2001). Religion explained: the human instincts that fashion gods, spirits and ancestors. London, Heinemann.

Cohen, Emma (2007). The Mind Possessed: the Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition. New York, OUP.

Comaroff, Jean (2009). "The Politics of Conviction: Faith on the Neo-liberal Frontier." Social Analysis 53(1): 17-38.

Gomes, Edlaine (2011). A Era das Catedrais: a autenticidade em exibição. Rio de Janeiro, Garamond.

Haar, Gerrie ter (1998). Halfway to paradise : African Christians in Europe. Fairwater, Cardiff, Cardiff Academic Press.

Haar, Gerrie ter (1998). Strangers and sojourners : religious communities in the diaspora. Leuven, Peeters.

Hunt, Stephen and Nicola Lightly (2001). "The British black Pentecostal 'revival': identity and belief in the 'new' Nigerian churches." Ethnic and Racial Studies 24(1).

Lehmann, David (2005). "The cognitive approach to understanding religion." Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions (131-132): 199-213.

Lehmann, David (2010). Rational Choice and its Critics. In The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion. ed. B. Turner. New York, Wiley.

Mahmood, Saba (2005). Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Maxwell, David (2006). African gifts of the spirit: Pentecostalism & the rise of a Zimbabwean transnational religious movement. Oxford, James Currey.