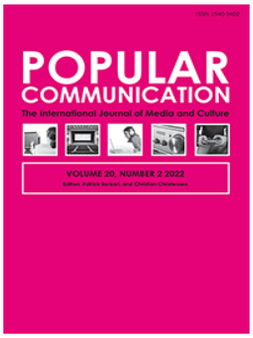

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The production of knowledge through religious and social media infrastructure: world making practices among Brazilian Pentecostals

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ABSTRACT

Following Robertson's discussions on epistemic capital, the article analyses worldmaking procedures being used by members of one of the biggest neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil – *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*. According to the popular narrative, social media, especially WhatsApp groups, contributed in a crucial way to the spread of sets of conspiracy theories aimed to question "established narratives" and creating an image of Jair Bolsonaro, currently the president of Brazil, as the sole hero ("the messiah" and "the myth") fighting against the "corrupted" Brazilian state and the "globalist/communist cabal." The article discusses interactions between members of so-called *families* created by the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*. These *families* could have between a few or around one hundred members, and they are in regular communication (at least a few times per day) through WhatsApp. Most members of one *family* do not live in walking proximity; therefore, using WhatsApp is often the primary way they interact. The article puts families into a broader context of the media ecosystem owned or influenced by *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* and contextualizes the church as a religious "infrastructure of knowing." The article discusses sources of legitimization of particular knowledge produced and mediated between *families*. The article argues that communication in *families* contributes to the creation of unique epistemic tools crucial in re-creating individual worldviews of members *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*.

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Introduction

Our investigation into the worldview of Brazilian Pentecostals began in 2019, and the most striking finding from the first stage of our research was that almost every person we interviewed somehow distanced him/herself from the institutional churches. We have repeatedly heard the phrase "I attend, but I do not belong" in different versions. This article focuses on findings from research being conducted mainly in 2020 and in 2021, during the pandemic's peak in Brazil, among members of the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, IURD[1]). We focus specifically here on so-called *families*,[2] groups of IURD members using WhatsApp to communicate and support each other. It is essential to say that during the work on

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this research, WhatsApp was the most popular social communication platform in Brazil. Still, there is nothing unique in this particular piece of software – families could use other platforms.

The article follows David G. Robertson's reflections on epistemic capital (2016, 2021), building upon his argument on the importance of analyzing power relationships while discussing creations and the existence of any worldview. Robertson identifies five types of epistemic capital – scientific, experience, tradition, channeled and synthetic – and here we ask how these different capitals are mobilized in the process of (re)producing the worldviews of individual IURD believers. Scientific capital does not play a significant role in the IURD worldview; to some extent, we can say it exists only as an external point of reference. Tradition also plays a relatively minor role here, therefore, the three most important capitals for our argument are channeled, experience and synthetic.

Channeled epistemic capital is elusive and individualistic. The only source legitimizing it comes from "outside" of this world. In the context of Protestant tradition, which grants a great deal of autonomy to believers (as clearly seen among Pentecostals who "attend but do not belong"), the ultimate judgment is made by the individual believer. Knowledge could come from God through the pastor, but for this to be accepted, the believers need to trust that the pastor is indeed channeling God's voice. Personal experience is not very different from channeled knowledge; it depends on personal interpretations of events. However, this kind of knowledge is often produced through bodily experiences. An experience of illness or the illness of a family member or a friend could be easily observed and shared, as an experience, with others. Synthetic knowledge is different, and it is to some extent the most "natural" way of we all make sense of the world; by connecting fragmented pieces of information, filtered by our personal experiences and by deeply embedded ("channelled") ways of knowing. The fundamental ethical core of each person could be seen as a particular channeled phenomenon; we "know" what is good and evil before we can justify and conceptualize our judgment.

The "epistemic turn" proposed by Robertson allows dismantling boundaries between diverse categories of worldviews, such as "religion," "conspiracy theory" or "common sense." We believe that the most exciting aspect of Robertson's proposal is acknowledging the hybrid, or "messy," nature of any knowledge and any worldview. However, the crucial argument of our article is that IURD is not a service provider but an infrastructure responding to social and spiritual needs; it could be seen primarily as an "infrastructure of knowing." This argument is based on the appropriation of AbdouMaliq Simone's concept from his seminal text "People as infrastructure," where he discussed " . . . people's actions as technical, and infrastructure generating possibilities of acting in concert beyond the explicit intention or planning of any individual or group" (2004). Further,

> The people as infrastructure notion, at its core, acknowledges the tyranny of imposing frozen, uni-dimensional categories on messy, evolving social life and social relations that assimilate countless processes and inheritances (ultimately rendering the search for cause and effect problematic) (2021)

We believe that Robertson's discussion on epistemic capital allows us to go beyond conventional and, in our opinion, misleading understandings of IURD as a highly efficient religious service provider in which its members are seen as customers (Mariano, 2004, 2014). A synthetic approach to producing and legitimizing knowledge means that we can

treat all possible sources of knowledge and mechanisms legitimizing knowledge as elements of an "infrastructure of knowing." This approach allows us to talk about media (TV) cultural production in the same way; as the production of anchors, references, and cultural infrastructure. In the process of contestation over epistemic capital, WhatsApp families work as a platform allowing personal experiences to be contextualized against a set of narratives proposed by IURD.

Perhaps surprisingly, we would like to return, here, to the foundation of sociological reflection of the world, and put the above discussion into the context of Max Weber's (2004) reflection on rationality. Weber argues that each individual uses the system of symbols, values and languages available in the social context to determine how to act. For Weber, society comprises different interdependent spheres of competence/domination. Each sphere is the result of multiple processes of rationalization that occur in distinct directions and orders; therefore, each sphere is in a specific stage of development. Thus, political, artistic, technological and economic progress occur more or less independently. The position we take in this article is more radical: on the one hand, we argue that the individual worldview is created and legitimized as a messy concoction, and the spheres defined by Weber are not really separated; on the other hand, we follow Weber's argument that reason could not be reduced to its practical instrumental form in mere calculations to maximize gains. Different types of rationality guide the actions of individuals while circumscribing certain practices, knowledge and ways of understanding the world. From Weber, we know that there are no hierarchies of more and less rational thinking; these are based on networks of different references.[3]

Context: Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD)

The Canadian missionary Robert Macalister came to Brazil in the late 1950s to conduct a religious campaign at the request of Lester Summer (Nascimento, 2010). Macalister's primary way to get in touch with evangelicals was to preach via radio stations. Through his experience with radio, he founded the Igreja Nova Vida (New Life Church) in Rio de Janeiro in 1964. Since its inception, the Nova Vida Church attracted most of its faithful among the Brazilian middle and lower-middle classes, unlike the Pentecostal churches that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (Mariano, 2014; Nascimento, 2010). Edir Macedo, leader of the IURD, was greatly influenced by Macalister and adopted many of his methods, such as the extensive use of radio (Freston, 1995; Nascimento, 2010).

Dissatisfied with the "elitism" of the Nova Vida Church, Macedo, Romildo R. Soares, Roberto Lopez, and the Coutinho brothers founded the Igreja Cruzada do Caminho Eterno (Crusade Church of the Eternal Path). Sometime later, the Coutinho brothers remained in the church while Macedo and the others created the IURD in 1977. Macedo was the second in command, but three years later, primarily because of his standing among church members, he assumed the leadership of IURD, and Romildo Soares created the Grace of God International Church.

Over the last forty years, neo-Pentecostalism has become a political and media force in Brazil. In the political sphere, there is the growth of the so-called "Evangelical Caucus," a term used by political scientists and the media to designate the members of the National Congress of Brazil and of state and municipal legislatures who call themselves evangelicals and who defend the same agendas promoted by evangelical leaders. (Freston, 1993; Silva, 2019)

This involvement in politics is better understood when put in the context of Dominion Theology (DT) (Barron, 1992; Heuser, 2021), of which Edir Macedo is a firm supporter. As Virginia Gerrard (2020) explains, historical disengagement of Pentecostals in the Latin America has been recently replaced by the urge to build strong connections between religion and politics. As should become apparent in this article, this "dominion" is not only about politics but about the whole spectrum of tools needed to conquer the world. We believe that defining IURD as a highly efficient religious infrastructure resonates well with the DT concept. IURD followers are not "customers," but "warriors" (Openshaw, 2020; Van Wyk, 2012).

Several factors make IURD a unique church. Politically, the church is one of the strongest and the most vocal supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro (Rodrigues, 2021); however, concerning the behaviors of its members, the church is more open and tolerant than many other Pentecostal churches. One can even say that the church is "liberal" concerning lifestyle (Mariz & Machado, 2018, pp. 41–54). The discourse used by IURD while talking about politics emphasizes the presence of "invisible forces," even the devil himself, and claims that IURD is the only one capable of expelling them. In this context, voting also becomes a religious act that purifies politics and eliminates evil. Using Mariano's (2014) sociological analysis from neo-Pentecostalism in Brazil, three key points help us understand the role of IURD:

(1) Pentecostal dualism (i.e. the war against the devil)
(2) Prosperity Theology
(3) The departure from traditional Pentecostal customs (including cultural events and use of virtual media)

The dualistic worldview that divides the world between good and evil forces is well represented by Edir Macedo's best-selling book, "Orixás, caboclos e guias: deuses ou demônios" [Orixás, caboclos and guides: Gods or demons] (2019), which denounces satanic maneuvers through Kardecism, Umbanda, Candomblé and other religions. As Mariano (2014) points out, "For Macedo, Christians should not be on the defensive, but on the offensive against the Devil, reversing the consequences of their actions, conquering territory and people for Jesus" (p. 122). According to Dawson (2011), this approach results in attacks against African-based religions and hostility toward the Catholic Church. However, the dualistic/territorial approach leads also to more long-term, institution-oriented strategies, sometimes called "conquering the world" (p. 161). This is a DT agenda. Its goal is to take control of the power structures that "support the enemy." This approach brings to mind the Gramscian notion of "passive revolution" or Catholic notion of "structures of evil" (discussed broadly by John Paul II), in which the secular world needs to become an infrastructure that supports goodness. This strategy makes civic society a battleground; it uses various actions such as social mobilizations, political lobbying and "culture war" (p. 161) to disseminate these ideas and gradually overtake institutions or, if this proves impossible, to weaken them until their eventual collapse.

Mariano (1999, 2014) points out that Prosperity Theology is not just a matter of preaching that God's plan for people is to make them blessed, healthy and prosperous, but that those who do not have faith or do not fulfil what the Bible says are not prosperous. Rather than promoting suffering, Prosperity Gospel values faith to achieve health, success and

power, which are presented as evidence of the believer's spiritual power and following of God's path. Furthermore, one of the main ways a believer can prove his faith is through donations to the church, based on the premise that if they give to the church, they will receive double back and start to see changes in their lives.

The third factor that makes the IURD so influential is the flexibility of dress codes and behavioral norms regarding believers' "worldly habits." They do not need to stop dressing as they want to, and they can contact God through television or WhatsApp. This approach also gives believers flexibility to define their sacred rituals, making religion intertwined with the mundane aspects of contemporary life, like popular culture, music, language and shopping habits. The IURD is not particularly supportive of drinking, partying or carnivals, but the church accepts that its members cannot drastically change their lives; therefore, while alcohol or partying are not recommended, they are not strictly forbidden either.

Ethnography of the *family* – in and out

Methodologically, this article employs critical and focused ethnographic perspectives. We approached the research with a pre-formulated research question, and we aimed to challenge the popular image of IURD as a hierarchical, rigid and conservative religious institution. The following section is based on fieldwork by one of the authors. At the beginning of 2019, as part of the research focused on the role of architecture in IURD activities, they began to attend events organized by IURD churches, specifically by the one located in the Lourdes neighborhood, the largest Pentecostal church in the state of Minas Gerais. "Catedral da Fé" is a massive building that clashes with its surroundings, displaying bank-like features in the front facade, a symbol of both the powers of the institution responsible for its existence, and, for the believers, a symbol of how high they can reach financially if they stick to the faith professed there. In short, the building is a massive icon of Prosperity Theology.

In the context of this article, it is worth seeing this building as an essential element of "infrastructure of knowing." It appeals to broadly recognizable visual elements of wealth and power, but it also provides spaces for the church members to gather and receive help and support. The facades are primarily white and glass-like, visually similar to banks and shopping malls; the monumental sized pillars resemble the ancient Greek temples, as the top is adorned with a pediment that holds the church's logo. The interior is just as promising: apart from the prayers' space, one can also find kindergartens, classrooms, sports rooms, spaces for practical courses and group sessions, a bookstore, and TV and radio studios. This infrastructure, available for believers, strengthens the relationship between members, as it gives them the space needed to work to improve their own lives and to support the church.

During the research the researcher spent as much time as possible in the temple and with the followers. They talked to ministers, helpers and believers, and slowly gathered information about the symbols, beliefs, cultures, feelings and everything surrounding that building. They always presented themselves as a researcher, clearly explaining their work and its purpose. Their presence was never questioned; on the contrary, many people they met were firmly convinced that God put them there, and their research would be God's way to attract them into the church. This approach should explain why they were invited into one of their *families* at the beginning of the project.

Even though the researcher did not understand how these families were organized, they accepted the invitation and were promptly added to a WhatsApp group. Later, they discovered that these groups were led by one pastor-chosen "obreiro" (official helpers of the pastors), and their main function was to gather new believers and encourage their presence in the services by disseminating official messages from the IURD among them. Families would grow as they added new members, drawn from friends and casual acquaintances, coworkers, and relatives. On Saturdays, the church would host a competition between all families, in which points would be added to those with more significant numbers on donations, new followers and voluntary work for the church. These competitions extend the work for the church's interests to these groups, guaranteeing more efficiency and swiftness in reaching church goals.

Members of the *family* did not seem to mind that the researcher was not a believer. Most of them assumed that it would only be a matter of time before they became one. They were warmly welcomed and well-treated, both in online discussions and when the family met together in person, in the same part of the church, every day of the week. Not all members of "their" *family* participated every day, although there was some delicate pressure to do so. There was always a list of names to add to the WhatsApp group if one participated in the prayers on that day. The Saturday celebrations, considered the most important ones, were where they would apply pressure. If someone was absent, different people from the family would ask for a reason in private conversations and even offer help to resolve whatever situation the absent person would be facing. In conversations and open speeches from ministers, they would certainly point out that the reason keeping one out of the church was a strategy from the devil itself.

This could be seen as an element of coercive control, but as mentioned above, friendly chats among members of the *family*, combined with the offer to help, suggest a lack of sinister intentions. The pressure is focused on a presence, on the opportunity to use the available infrastructure, not on particular behaviors, actions or ways of thinking.

During the peak of the COVID- pandemic, 2019, Brazil's Federal government categorized church attendance as an "essential activity," which meant they were not obligated to be closed to control infection. However, the mayor of Belo Horizonte, Alexandre Kalil, decided to contest this decision and talked publicly about closing them with a court order. That was the first, and only, time the researcher had seen people from the family discussing a topic unrelated to their personal lives or beliefs: *family* members seemed to be outraged, sharing long texts about how this was absurd and Kalil would be doing "devil's work." Even though Kalil made his decision official on April 4th, 2021, in Universal radio stations and the family's WhatsApp group, leaders advised followers to ignore this court order and continue the on-site celebrations. Many members of the family the researcher joined showed no worries about this, as they would not believe God would allow the disease to spread in "his own house." We want to contextualize their reaction to this situation. Most family members are manual workers who kept working during the pandemic. They could not "work from home" because of the nature of their work. Therefore they were likely to be exposed to the virus during their work-related activities. Why then was it acceptable, they asked, to meet people when we work, but it was not acceptable to meet them to pray and celebrate? Their view on this issue was therefore not only shaped by the pastors' preaching, but was built out of their personal experiences.

Except for the example above, most conversations in the family consist of shared Bible texts, invitations to church events and celebrations, calls for volunteers to work on advertising the church on the streets and, on a smaller scale, personal issues regarding the health of blood-family members, employment searches and small-talk with new members. I have never witnessed any heated discussions or disagreements whatsoever: people seemed very aligned with the tenets of the religion, and there was a strong sense of community among my family members. Nevertheless, there were certainly what could appear to be contradictory statements. We have argued that most Pentecostals we interviewed declared that they "attend but not belong" to the church, seemingly agreeing with those scholars who describe the IURD as an organization that does not contribute to building a community of believers. However, we also argue for the presence of a strong community spirit in the families we have investigated in Belo Horizonte. We suggest that there is no contradiction if we see the IURD as infrastructure, with various uses and services available. The church creates opportunities for believers to build whatever social connections they want to. It is not primarily about belonging to the church, but about other, small-scale and much more personal social bonds sustained by the churchgoers.

About half of the Bible excerpts shared among members of my *family* were related to a particular minister or pastor, with a picture of them by the side, which I see as a very efficient strategy to reinforce the person's authority through an association with the sacred text. Apart from the (delicate) pressure to attend common prayers, especially on Saturdays, this is probably the closest to what could be seen as a presence of tradition in families. As Robertson explains: "Tradition is essentially 'people like us do things like this,' ... it is collective and can be found both in institutional (top-down) forms and looser social groups (bottom-up)." This is another example of how the concept of infrastructure works in sync with Robertson's discussion on epistemic capital. Citations from the Bible work as elements of an "infrastructure of knowing," and when associated with the images of pastors, create another set of trusted anchors. However, the fact that there are many pastors reinforces the position of the individual believer, who may choose which one of them to trust and follow.

The researcher was a member of the family for about a year, and during this time, they could understand one of the reasons why they was so promptly added to the group chat in WhatsApp: there is a competition between families, so much so that they are divided into divisions just like the soccer competition in Brazil named "Brasileirão," but in this case, they call it "Brasileirão of Souls." They collect points for every new member, and if they do not have enough points, they would descend from division A to B, and if they fell to division E, they would be obligated to delete the group altogether. Through association with the most celebrated sport in the country, this strategy encourages people to invite new people into the family, making individual believers responsible for the church's growth.

This strategy also encourages the IURD to remain relatively open and inclusive. There are no restrictions regarding clothes, hair, and body changes, as discussed above. If you attend a meeting on Saturdays which is aimed at young people, you will see colorful hair, many piercings and even facial tattoos. This openness gives the IURD a "cooler vibe" compared to some other Pentecostal churches in Brazil (for example, Assembleia de Deus or Deus é Amor, among others), in which some women are not allowed to cut their hair or wear trousers. This kind of conservative appearance is not broadly accepted in Brazilian society; the IURD avoids this and, by doing so, attracts more believers.

When the research project came to an end, there was no reason to keep attending the church meetings. As soon as the researcher's absence was noted (in the first week), people asked if something was wrong. When the researcher explained the reasons for not accepting invitations to meetings, they were eventually excluded from the WhatsApp group, which led to the final, somehow obvious, observation: to be a part of the family, showing up is an essential requirement.

During the interviews done by the Authors, many members of the IURD mentioned their *families*. The interviewees also referred to other believers as part (or not) of their families and explained that, during the pandemic, the group became even more robust, and they also used it for purposes not directly related to the religious activities. The families described by interviewees seem to be groups of friends, with no hierarchy and with a simple aim to keep the believers integrated into a more extensive group (i.e., the whole church).

IURD and media

"Popular communication" is often defined through objects (commodities) widely circulated by mass media, with which people frequently interact. The cultural production of IURD constantly recycles references to Christianity, reproducing it in contexts of Pentecostal spaces, buildings and practices. Mariano (2013, 2016) presents the idea of subcultural identity elaborated by Christian Smith to understand evangelicals in modern societies. Evangelicals have a prolific cultural production that competes aggressively with other cultures for space. Mariano states that this is an attempt to expand their influence socially. The presence of the IURD in different media can be understood in different ways: 1) as a strategy to spread its teaching and attract new followers in the context of religious pluralism; 2) as a way to influence society (to overtake the social infrastructure); and 3) as a method to strengthen the IURD's religious identity. However, in the context of our discussion above, we would like to see the presence (and ownership) of the IURD in the media as a crucial mechanism of constructing the "infrastructure of knowing." Their media productions help to build a set of references that individual believers can rely on. The process should not be, in our opinion, seen simply as producing IURD propaganda, but rather as creating a shared cultural space where all believers can meet.

Neo-Pentecostals, unlike previous Pentecostal waves, support the pursuit of financial prosperity (which is the essence of the Prosperity Gospel) and a focus on the holistic wellbeing of its followers; as the slogan encapsulating the IURD's teaching says, "Stop suffering!" (Cartledge, 2021). Since neo-Pentecostalism is an essentially urban religion (Lanz, 2016; Parsitau & Mwaura, 2010; Togarasei, 2005), the city and architecture play an essential role in the IURD's activities, for example, the construction of monumental temples in urban public spaces.

We would like to come back to Weber's sociology again, and specifically to Weber's typology of domination. Why would one individual (B) obey another (A)? 1) B may believe A has the legitimacy to be obeyed because they are in a context or situation which has always happened that way, and it is thus a tradition; or 2) B is going to obey because they believe A possesses extraordinary attributes which grant them the authority to issue orders. Weber characterized the first situation as "Traditional Domination" while the second would be the "Charismatic Domination." Charismatic domination differs from the traditional one because of its ephemeral character; it only exists for an instant moment of rupture,

a revolutionary irruption. Charismatic domination is crucial in Weberian sociology, as it is responsible for change – charisma is responsible for the rupture with tradition. This focus on a rupture fits well with the dynamic of Pentecostal progression in Belo Horizonte. Based on our other research project, we can say that the urban core, the parts of the city with established communities, tend to be inhabited by Catholics or other religions with a relatively long history in Brazil, such as Kardecism, Umbanda or Candomble. The new parts of the city, where the local communities are still under-formed, are inhabited mainly by (neo-)Pentecostals. These underdeveloped communities create an opportunity for the IURD, allowing the church to help people to organize, to create support networks and some feeling of belonging.

The media empire built by IURD is an infrastructural project aiming to protect believers from the troubles and challenges of the contemporary world. As we said before, IURD has a dualistic view of the world – the church provides refuge against the evils of the contemporary world (Birman & Lehmann, 1999). In this article, we have focused on social media, but we cannot ignore the context of the whole media ecosystem built by IURD – the only church in Brazil with its own TV station, with the church producing news and even highly popular soap operas. Different elements of this ecosystem have different functions: TV and radio stations create the basic set of cultural (religious, political) references, but WhatsApp's *families* aim to create a platform for individual engagement and the reproduction of the cultural landscape presented through traditional media. The prominent role of WhatsApp's *families* demonstrates the church's trust in its members and the importance of their individual agency.

It will be helpful to explain the scale of the IURD's media presence. The IURD owns the third-largest television network in Brazil, TV Record, comprising a group of 4 networks that control 70% of available network programming in the country (de Toledo & Cazavechia, 2021). In addition, it produces more than 1500 hours of programming per month, across six different television stations. The IURD also owns another television network, 62 radio stations, a newspaper, a printing company, a publishing house, a record label and a video production company.

Within the public programming of TV Record, there is a daily transmission of exclusive IURD programs, with content produced (although not exclusively) by the IURD. Live call-in programs take calls from the public, on topics typical of call-and-advice shows, such as relationship and family problems. In addition to TV Record, IURD programs are also broadcast on other networks such as TV Gazeta, Rede Mulher, RedeTV! And Rede Aleluia. The soap operas featured on Rede Record are also known for their religious content, often presenting stories with biblical settings, which can be seen as a soft power instrument contributing to the spread of IURD teachings. As Arruda (2021, p. 70) explains, the scenographies and general visual references used in the IURD's soap operas are based on the visual and spatial qualities present in IURD's churches.

Besides TV, IURD counts with many other sources of communication. In a society marked by hyper-connectivity, reaching people through different platforms simultaneously is an essential growth strategy. Therefore, the church counts with its radio station, a website with online pastors available 24/7 for chatting, and social media, Instagram and Facebook pages that work as a source of content distributed between non-official platforms. These platforms, such as WhatsApp groups formed by followers, and numerous unofficial social media pages, are run by IURD members, compiling the content from "official" web pages as

they wish. These social networks have three aims: first, to keep followers engaged in the life of the religious community; second, to repeat cultural references presented in the traditional media (to keep the content familiar); and third, to promote pastors as leaders of opinion. These three aims are interconnected – pastors who appear more often on TV and radio produce content that is then shared in social media. A typical example of this mechanism is Pastor Renato Cardoso and his wife Cristiane, hosts of the show "Love School," where they advise people on their behavior and life decisions. Their voices become familiar as their faces are repeatedly shown, and followers repeat their words. In that sense, the whole ecosystem of IURD's media is the most potent instrument of legitimization, building and accumulating social capital for specific pastors and the church as a whole.

WhatsApp families also address one of the fundamental aspects of all Pentecostal churches – the focus on social mobilization. One of the primary purposes of the *families* is to keep a strong internal connection between members. The aim is to keep members engaged as part of the IURD and prevent them from drifting away, or returning to other churches. Contrary to many analyses of the IURD (for example, Franco, 2007; Van Wyk, 2014), our findings do not support the claim of the IURD being a strictly hierarchical organization controlling its members. The mechanisms of control by spreading rumors, as described by Van Wyk, do not seem to exist in the *families* we have observed and analyzed. As mentioned above, and perhaps against the intentions of the IURD in Belo Horizonte, the church helps to establish strong social bonds between members. The connections between members of a particular *family* are maintained online, but there are events – such as the communal lunches on Sundays – where members of different families meet.

Conclusions: epistemic contestation and Pentecostal worldmaking

In this article, we have discussed how, in keeping with Dominion Theology strategy, the IURD aims to create a sphere, simultaneously material and spiritual, where its members can live their lives. This is why we argue that the IURD should be considered as infrastructure, not just as a service provider. Their aim could only be achieved by mobilizing many people to join the effort.

The expansion of the sphere of influence is not a choice; it is an existential necessity, even if that militates toward the IURD being flexible concerning the lifestyles of its followers. The approach we observe among many Pentecostals – "I attend, but I do not belong," based on a solid feeling of individual autonomy of believers – is challenged by the IURD. The whole church seems to focus on creating an infrastructure which allows people to use its services and to be connected with the church (as an institution and as a community), but at the same time, the IURD does not expect its members to "fully belong." The IURD focuses on the contextualized experiences of its members; even the Bible may be questioned if believers feel it contradicts their own experiences. The flexibility of the IURD leads to the church sometimes being accused of not being Christian at all. Alternatively, the IURD is often presented as another ultra-conservative religious organization, or fundamentalist evangelical church. As discussed in this article, we believe it is justifiable to suggest this is not the case, and that the IURD is an innovative, "meta-modern" religious organization, focused on creating an infrastructure for the "better world" and accepting a substantial degree of autonomy for its believers.

Neo-Pentecostalism does not tend to emphasize the education of its members. The IURD is no different, and does not require training in theology or experience in religious seminars from its pastors. The same applies to the believers, who generally do not have extensive knowledge of the Bible or IURD theology. In this context, the most important thing is personal experience with the sacred, so that if something in the Bible does not please the believer, they are free to ignore it. The IURD's sermons, which often have low biblical relevance, may be related to their focus on the material dimension of their religious perspective (Nascimento, 2010). Referring to Robertson's discussion on epistemic capitals, we can see how members of IURD build their worldviews based on personal experiences, legitimized by their channeled knowledge, while using IURD's teaching as references. In the contestation over epistemic capital, *families* allow for experience and (to a lesser extent) tradition to be mobilized in affective ways supporting the IURD cultural hegemony but also making space for believers' experimentations in individual worldviews.

The church's authority is built on the personal charisma of its pastors supported by the material and social infrastructure and the "infrastructure of knowing" created by the church. However, the final legitimization of any knowledge produced by the Church structures is done by individual believers. The IURD gives guidance and suggestions, but it should be seen as an evolving ecosystem built of interconnected but autonomous actors, rather than an authoritarian, fundamentalist organization. *Families* are part of this ecosystem – helping their members to travel together, roughly defining their direction. Members of *families* are told what they should not or should do, what a particular event could mean and how to understand God's signs, but it is up to the individual believers to decide each step they make. The IURD promises its members the space to live their lives more safely and comfortably than outside the church structure. The IURD gives its members tools to make sense of their individual experiences, but the personal experiences themselves are the foundation of believers' worldviews.

Notes

1. We are aware that the most popular acronym of *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus is UCKG (coming from English name of the church: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God)* however, following Virginia Garrard and many Brazilian scholars we decided to keep Portuguese acronym: IURD.
2. As should become clear in the other sections of the article, families do not have a structure of a biological family, but rather resemble a group of friends or support network.
3. We consider it essential to say that the central part of our research was conducted after Jair Bolsonaro was elected as president of Brazil, and political issues have been somewhat marginally present in families' discussions. This is important because the importance of social media during the presidential campaign (Aruguete, Calvo, & Ventura, 2021; Garcia, 2019) has been broadly discussed and researched, but our research seems to suggest a lack of interest in politics in the families in the post-election period.

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