

## **Discrimination Against La Luz del Mundo Members After the Arrest of the Apostle**

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**ABSTRACT:** Conservative Protestants with a traditional view of sexuality are often discriminated and ridiculed by the media in contemporary Latin American societies. The discrimination against La Luz del Mundo members is part of this general pattern, but is also different. The fact that La Luz del Mundo, while adhering to certain conservative moral values, is a progressive church promoting education and the separation of church and state, is not taken into account when members are discriminate based on media news about the arrest and prosecution of their Apostle. Serious instances of discrimination have been reported in various countries.

**KEYWORDS:** La Luz del Mundo, The Light of the World, Naasón Joaquín García, Religious Intolerance, Religious Discrimination.

### *Religious Intolerance*

On August 14, 2019, I attended the Holy Supper of the Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, The Light of the World (La Luz del Mundo) at its world headquarters in the city of Guadalajara, Mexico. I met there two friends, Bigvai Estrada, a minister of La Luz del Mundo in Texas, and Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist and editor of *The Journal of CESNUR*. As a special issue of that journal was being prepared, I was asked to submit some personal comments, as a lawyer and a long-time observer (but not a member) of La Luz del Mundo, on the issue of the discrimination reported by several church devotees after the news media reported that their Apostle had been arrested in California and held there on multiple charged of sexual abuse.

First of all, what exactly can be conceptualized as religious intolerance? Brazilian sociologist Letícia Rodrigues Ferreira Netto defines it as

a form of violence, physical or symbolic, which aims to deny and suppress one religion over another. In other words, it is a case of prejudice associated with some kind of violence, in which the intention is to deny the existence of specific religions as such (Rodrigues Ferreira Netto 2017).

Often, “religious intolerance comes from hegemonic movements,” which seek “to impose theirs as the only possible vision of the world, putting an end to the dissemination of opposite visions” (Rodrigues Ferreira Netto 2017).

Therefore, we can deduce that all human behavior of an agent in relation to an individual who has a different belief can be understood as religious intolerance when the purpose is coercing, censoring, or attacking the person in a disrespectful way because of that belief.

### *Intolerance Against Conservative Protestants in Latin America*

In Brazil, the best example in the recent history are the attacks suffered by the founder of the large Pentecostal Church Brazil for Christ, Manuel de Melo (1929–1990). The court cases against Pentecostals in São Paulo were instigated by the Catholic clergy, which was at that time very influential on all spheres of government. Pastor de Melo was arrested 27 times, accused of charlatanism and abusive exercise of medicine, for his preaching and belief in the doctrine that miracles and healing can and do continue in our present time (de Araújo 2007, 805–6).

On a personal note, I had myself the sad experience, in the 1980s and 1990s, of living in an environment of discrimination at school, because at the time I was a member of a Protestant Holiness church. Even more common, to this very day, in Brazil is the discrimination of Evangelical Protestants, especially young people and women, for their conservative lifestyle. They refuse to adhere to the prevailing liberal behaviors about clothing and dances, that they reject as a form of sensualizing the body, and they do not use swearing or derogatory language. Their conservative Christian view of sex and morality clashes head-on with the liberal and permissive views of the majority promoted by mainstream media and popular culture.

In fact, in Brazil and throughout Latin America, large TV networks such as the Brazil-based Rede Globo, were largely responsible for disseminating the view that only the liberal and permissive view of sexuality is “normal” in contemporary society. The fact that a large segment of Latin American society was composed of conservative Christians, both Catholic and Evangelical, with different views was ignored. The pervasive influence of popular culture and mainstream media on young people, together with other factors such as the frequent absence of the maternal and paternal figures in the daily lives of children, explains why this liberal vision ended up being fixed in the minds of the youth as the best and the only correct one. I see this as a case of mass indoctrination, similar to what was practiced by state propaganda in totalitarian regimes.

While advertised under the banner of non-discrimination, this cultural climate ended up creating a discrimination against millions of Latin American Evangelicals. When in the name of their faith they criticized sex outside the marriage, homosexuality, and even Afro-Brazilian and other Afro-American religions, they were ridiculed, marginalized, and sometimes taken to court for hate speech, including in cases when their criticism had been expressed in a respectful way. We see, thus, the paradox that one form of freedom of expression is limited in the name of another form of the same freedom of expression.

### *Discrimination Against La Luz del Mundo Believers*

La Luz del Mundo believers are generally at risk because they espouse the same conservative Christian lifestyle that is assaulted when practiced by other groups. However, there are also differences. As I have observed during the years, despite being a conservative church and maintaining the same moral and doctrinal values, uses, and customs since its foundation almost a century ago, La Luz del Mundo is at the same time progressive, as it encourages education, entrepreneurship, and the formation of “good citizens” in the spirit of the Mexican Revolution and the principle of separation of church and state. Its members have been successful in many different spheres of society. Some started to work in the media and in the state bureaucracy, and became highly respected because of their professionalism and work ethic in the various countries where La Luz del Mundo is active.

Things, however, changed when Apostle Naasón was arrested in 2019. The media reported news of the arrest in a sensational style. Some did not know anything about La Luz del Mundo and pronounced it overnight a “cult.” A phenomenon of discrimination against La Luz del Mundo members started, and is still continuing. What is happening is a typical phenomenon of labeling and of attributing to a whole community crimes for which a person or a group of persons have been charged.

I do understand that in this case the person accused is not a common member, but the leader of La Luz del Mundo. Yet, two principles should remain firm. The first is that, when a person is accused of having committed a crime, that person is entitled to the presumption of innocence until a final decision is rendered. This applies to everybody, obviously including the Apostle of La Luz del Mundo and his co-defendants. Second, liability for a crime is personal and do not extend to other members of the same family, organization, or religious community.

What I have seen with astonishment is that common members of La Luz del Mundo are discriminated in schools and workplaces because their Apostle is in jail. If I can make bold comparisons, this is as absurd as discriminating against all Germans for the war crimes of the Nazis, or all BP employees because BP is responsible for the oil spilling from a platform in the Gulf of Mexico, with the relevant difference that in these cases, that crimes were committed had been ascertained by courts of law, while the prosecution against Apostle Naasón is just in its preliminary stages. This form of discrimination is unacceptable in all circumstances.

I have examined reports and documents about several instances of serious discrimination. A father has separated from his wife and fights for the custody of his son, claiming the latter cannot be left with his mother who is a member of La Luz del Mundo. The fact that her behavior is irreprehensible and that she is a good mother is acknowledged by the husband, but regarded as somewhat less important than the fact that the leader of her religion is in jail.

Members of La Luz del Mundo were fired and lost their jobs because of the news about the Apostle, although there is no legal or behavioral link between the fact and how they operated in their respective workplaces, where they were not accused of any wrongdoing. Students in schools were bullied and beaten.

These seems to be instances of discrimination unworthy of a civilized society. Would it be legal or fair to fire employees who exhibit good conduct and good productivity just because they have a sibling in another state who is said to be a drug user? Would it be fair to assault or insult Catholics in general because some priests have been convicted of sexual abuse? Would it be regarded as acceptable to discriminate a university student with good grades and good behavior because he is homosexual? Or to harass those of Japanese origins today because Japanese soldiers in World War II raped Chinese and Korean women?

I am sure that any reader of this article would answer “no” to all these questions. However, if the reason for discrimination is being a member of La Luz del Mundo, rather than being Catholic, homosexual, or Japanese, for some the answers may change.

My personal opinion is that religious intolerance comes from lack of education, and the best way to combat it is through education. The cases I am most concerned with are those of La Luz del Mundo students who have been bullied in schools because of their faith. The fact that other students and some teachers have attacked these students is disturbing. It becomes even more disturbing when it is considered within a general pattern of discrimination against minorities, immigrants, and refugees.

The very presence of teachers who exhibit behaviors of religious intolerance of this kind is troubling. The behavior of students who practiced acts of intolerance is also alarming, because it shows deficiencies in their education both in their families and at school. Discrimination is always the first step, eventually leading to labeling those who are different as monsters, and building walls if not concentration camps.

Happily, we live in democratic societies, where the best weapon to seek protection from intolerance is to file complaints with the appropriate authorities. They have already taken action in some cases of discrimination against members of La Luz del Mundo. This is an effective immediate remedy. In the long term, however, the only cure for intolerance is something called education.

## **References**

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