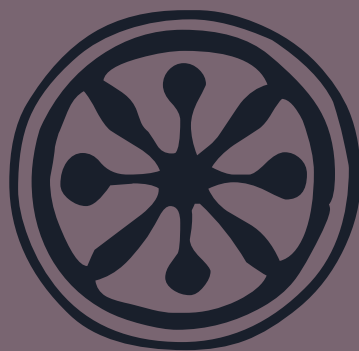

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La Luz del Mundo: A Short History

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ABSTRACT: La Luz del Mundo is one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the world. It seems to have experienced no decline even after his current leader, Naasón Joaquín García, was arrested and detained in California on charges of sexual abuse in 2019. The article reconstructs the origins of La Luz del Mundo in 1920s Mexico, and its growth under three subsequent leaders who have been recognized as God's Apostles for our times, Aarón Joaquín González, Samuel Joaquín Flores, and Naasón Joaquín García. At the time of this writing, Apostle Naasón continues to direct from his prison cell in California a church that becomes, from Mexican, increasingly globalized and international.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, Light of the World, Aarón Joaquín González, Samuel Joaquín Flores, Naasón Joaquín García, Mexican New Religious Movements.

Mexico 1926: The Social Context

It was December 12, 1926. Catholics in Guadalajara were celebrating the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a tense, contradictory mood. The statue of the *Guadalupeana* toured the city in procession, the churches were full, and for some the feast was the opportunity for drinking, dancing, and even visiting the local brothels (Dormady 2007, 128). On the other hand, the city was well aware that a Catholic rebellion against the anticlerical government of President Plutarco Elías Calles (1877–1945) was about to erupt. Calles had emerged as a fierce opponent of the Catholic Church, and spared no effort to impose in Mexico his own brand of Jacobin secularism. On August 3, some 400 Catholics had occupied the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Guadalajara and exchanged gunfire with federal troops, in a battle that had left 18 dead. Northeast of the city, armed Catholic rebels were quietly organizing. The bloody Cristero War will start on

January 1, 1927, last until June 1929, and cost an estimated number of 250,000 victims (Meyer 1997).

That day, a ragged non-Catholic preacher arrived in Guadalajara with his wife, having walked his way there from the faraway city of Monterrey. His name was Eusebio Joaquín González (1896–1964), but he had just adopted that year the religious name Aarón. While he was scandalized by the disorderly conduct of some Catholics, the city largely ignored him. Unbeknownst to the citizens of Guadalajara, and the authorities, the destitute Aarón carried with him what will prove to be the most viable alternative to Catholicism in Mexico. Fellow Mexicans, however, will discover it only several years later.

In the 20th century, it was fashionable to depict the Cristero War as a social rebellion of impoverished peasants disappointed by a Mexican Revolution that had not kept its promises of social justice (Purnell 1999). Since the 1970s, French-Mexican historian Jean Meyer had advanced the theory that the religious factor was not peripheral, but central. In what was later called the *Cristiada* (see e.g. Meyer 1997). The term, *Cristiada*, had in fact been coined by Meyer himself and was never applied to the rebellion before him (Butler 2004, 5). Meyer's works, well-documented as they were, were dismissed by some as excessively favorable to the Cristeros.

In 2004, historian Matthew Butler published a revised edition of his 2000 Oxford doctoral dissertation, where he argued that both the dominant historiographical position and Meyer's revisionism were inaccurate. Neither the Catholics nor their opponents constituted monolithic blocks in 1926. There were anti-Cristero Catholics, and supporters of Calles somewhat "soft" on Catholicism. Nor can the war be interpreted as a struggle between the rich and the poor. Some Cristeros were rich, and some supporters of Calles were very much poor (Butler 2004). The Cristero War had multiple causes, yet, Butler concluded, the religious motivation was never unimportant and for some was crucial—nor was the attitude of the Catholic clergy as irrelevant as some maintained (Butler 2004; Butler and Powell 2018).

Obviously, religion is never the single factor causing wars. All "religious" wars and insurrections are *also* social and political. The risk exists that a new unilateral interpretation, looking only at the religious causes, may replace the old one ignoring them. The fact that the Catholic Church in the 21st century has beatified and canonized more than thirty Catholic victims of the war, something that was

criticized by Mexicans with a different view of the Cristeros, including members of the church founded by Aarón, certainly contributed to focusing the attention on the religious factor. To this, the international success should be added of the 2012 Hollywood movie *For Greater Glory*, which told the story of the war from the point of view of the Cristeros and starred such well-known actors as Andy García, Eva Longoria, and Peter O'Toole (1932–2013).

Another risk of these developments is that the attention may focus on Catholics only, ignoring their opponents. They were not all ruthless torturers motivated by personal gain to serve an oppressive regime. As Butler noticed, the opposition to the Catholic Church and the defense of the principle of separation of church and state were also genuinely popular ideas, with deep and complicated roots dating back to the Colonial period (Butler 2004, 15–49). And the opposition, in turn, was not united. There were atheists and Marxists, but most of those harboring grievances against the Catholic Church did believe in God.

The history of Protestantism in Mexico is another controversial theme. Several Protestant denominations are present in Mexico from the 19th century but, even today, the percentage of Protestants in the total Mexican population is only around 7% (to which one million Mormons and 1.7 million Jehovah's Witnesses should be added: see Puckett 2017, 15, for references to the statistical sources). There is no doubt that Protestants are, and were, a significant minority, but those anti-Catholic revolutionary thinkers who believed that Protestantism might soon replace Catholicism in Mexico were simply deluded.

Protestantism was dismissed by Catholic propaganda as “foreign” (often “American,” which also applied to the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses), and derived from schisms that walked away from the only and one apostolic continuity of the Roman Catholic Church. And Catholics liked to repeat that, if not all Mexicans are Catholics, all are *Guadalupanos*. They said this half-jokingly, but to the annoyance of non-Catholics, who offered themselves as evidence that the statement was not true. However, the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, believed to have revealed herself in 1531 to the native Mexican Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (1474–1548), had created a unique claim of Mexicanness for the Catholic Church. The divine had manifested itself directly in Mexico only once, Catholics claimed, and it had happened in a Catholic context.

Calles was so much aware of these problems that he favored the creation in the 1920s of a schismatic Iglesia Católica Apostólica Mexicana (ICAM, Mexican

Catholic Apostolic Church) loyal to his government. Not unlike similar experiments in other countries, the ICAM met with a very limited success. Given the choice, Catholics preferred the original item (Butler 2009).

The divine, or so Aarón and his followers firmly believed, had in fact already manifested himself to a non-Catholic in Mexico that same year, on April 6, 1926. Only, not many Mexicans were aware of it.

The Making of an Apostle: Aarón Joaquín González

Eusebio Joaquín González was born in Colotlán, in the Mexican state of Jalisco, on August 14, 1896, in a family of peasants. Like Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin, he was *moreno* (dark-skinned), which will later be mentioned as evidence of his genuine Mexicanness. Colotlán was not a safe place in a time of armed uprisings, and the family, which included three other children, relocated in Tlaltenango, in the state of Zacatecas. There, Eusebio was at least able to receive some schooling, and later to serve himself as a teacher for the younger children of his school (Rentería Solís 1997, 36).

Like many other young Mexicans of his time, Eusebio felt called to participate in the Mexican Revolution, seeking freedom and social justice. Sometimes in the early 1910s, he joined the militias of Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1878–1923), only to discover that his army practiced the very indiscriminated violence against the peasants Villa had promised to fight. Eusebio thus left Villa in 1913, and joined the Constitutionalist Army of the future Mexican President Venustiano Carranza (1859–1920). He found the *constitucionalistas* much more disciplined than the *villistas*, yet something in the military life failed to satisfy him (Rentería Solís 2015, 16).

While on leave from Carranza’s army in the early 1920s, he visited his parents, who had moved to Guadalajara, and met a young woman who, like his family, had relatives in Colotlán, Elisa Flores (1902–1985). They got married in 1925, and Elisa followed her husband to his new military posts, first in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and then in San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila. It was in the latter town that Elisa, in late 1925, while visiting the local market, met a merchant, Rosa Murillo (as for other characters in the early history of the movement, I was not able to identify her years of life and death). Rosa was part of the Pentecostal

branch in Mexico that had started with Romanita Carbajal de Valenzuela, a woman from the state of Chihuahua who had personally participated in the revival that started in 1906 in Azusa Street in Los Angeles, one of the founding events of international Pentecostalism (Sánchez Walsh 2003, 19).

Although the branch directly connected with Romanita was the Iglesia Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús, a oneness Pentecostal group (i.e. one denying the traditional notion of the Trinity and baptizing in the name of Jesus Christ only), which still exists today with roughly one million members throughout Latin America, the church Elisa came in touch with was the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual (I.C.E.). The I.C.E. later merged with the followers of independent Irish missionary to Mexico, Joseph Stewart (1871–1926), into the Iglesia Evangélica Cristiana Espiritual, I.E.C.E., which is also still active in both North and South America. The Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual was led at that time by Francisco Borrego Martínez (1898–1978), a former member of the Iglesia Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús, and was also part of Oneness Pentecostalism (I.E.C.E. 2015).

Elisa, and later Eusebio as well, met with Borrego and with two curious characters, Antonio Muñoz (d. 1935) and Francisco Flores, who went under the name of Saulo and Silas (I.E.C.E. 2016; other sources claim Silas' real name was José Perales: Rentería Solís 2015, 19). Eusebio may have also met Stewart during one of his visits to the area (Rentería Solís 2015, 22). Saulo and Silas claimed to have received the gift of prophecy, and to be guided by dreams and visions. At least, they looked very much like Biblical prophets, with their sandals, long tunics, and equally long beards and hair. They opposed their charismatic authority to the institutional authority of the pastors, and created considerable trouble along the different branches of the Pentecostal network, in different Mexican states (I.E.C.E. 2016).

Eusebio was baptized by Silas at the end of 1925. His conversion put him at odds with his fellow soldiers and his commander, particularly after he refused to participate in the execution of a man, claiming this was against the Bible. Eusebio decided to leave the army, and he and Elisa followed Saulo and Silas to Monterrey. As Eusebio later discovered, the two prophets' morality and sexual escapades were not exactly what one would expect from men of God. They welcomed Eusebio and Elisa in their home in Monterrey, but expected them to work as the prophets' unpaid servants (Rentería Solís 2015, 19–28).

He and Elisa stayed with Saulo and Silas, until the fateful dawn of April 6, 1926. What happened then is the foundational event of La Luz del Mundo. According to his report, while he was sleeping, Eusebio was awakened by a thunderous noise, and heard a voice telling him, “Here is a man whose name will be Aarón. I will make this name known around all the world, and it will be a blessing.” He tried to dismiss this as a dream, but was awakened again by the voice. An enormous hand pointed at him, and the voice shouted, “Your name is Aarón.” Eusebio then noticed that a hole was forming in the ceiling, through which he could see the stars moving to form the words, “Your name is Aarón, and I will make it known around all the world, and it will be a blessing” (Rentería Solís 2015, 31–6).

In the subsequent decade, the two prophets’ movement will collapse under the weight of their scandals, and the Iglesia Evangélica Cristiana Espiritual will also go through several schisms. Borrego will be expelled from it and establish a new denomination, the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual Efesios 2:20 (I.E.C.E. 2015).

But Eusebio, now Aarón, was not interested in these developments. He knew his Bible well enough to realize that Aaron, the brother of Moses, served as High Priest in Israel. He understood his experience of April 6 as going beyond a personal calling to a life of holiness and evangelization. God, he believed, had made much more. He had restored the primitive Christian Church, which had been corrupted throughout the centuries, and its key feature, the presence of apostles, and had appointed Aarón as the new and the only Apostle for the restored church. This *elección*, or *llamamiento apostólico*, i.e. the divine choice of an Apostle to lead God’s church, became a key belief for Aarón’s followers (de la Torre 2000, 73).

God, Aarón reported, had also commanded him to abandon Saulo and Silas. He left Monterrey on foot, with Elisa and a small group of followers, and started his journey to faraway Guadalajara, the city where his parents lived and where, as we have seen, he arrived on December 12, 1926, after a long and dangerous trip through a countryside where bandits and rebels roamed. Aarón’s family rejected him. They were Catholics, and would not support a non-Catholic religious enterprise (Dormady 2007, 128).

Prospects did not seem bright in Guadalajara, yet Aarón believed the voice of God had commanded him to evangelize there. He started working odd jobs to support the small community and his family, which was soon to welcome the birth

of his first son, Pablo (1928–1942). Soon the congregation started to grow, as did his family, to which another seven children will be added between 1929 and 1937.

The first meetings were in private homes, but in 1934 a small place of worship was acquired in Guadalajara's Sector Libertad, in the Calle 46, which offered the opportunity for registering the church with the municipal authorities. Aarón reported that God had revealed to him the name "Iglesia del Dios Vivo Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad La Luz del Mundo" (Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, The Light of the World)—although the names mentioned in the legal documents were "Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual Evangélica" and later "Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual Evangélica La Luz del Mundo" (Evangelical Spiritual Christian Church The Light of the World) (Dormady 2011, 38–40; Torres Álvarez 2016, 27).

By that time, Aarón had already ordained his first (male) ministers, and two women as deaconesses, one of whom was his wife (Dormady 2011, 35). In 1931, he had presided over the first yearly Santa Cena (Holy Supper), the main religious event for La Luz del Mundo, whose date will later be fixed at August 14, the founder's birthday. Eventually, the Santa Cena will evolve into an international and spectacular mass religious ceremony (Fortuny 2002). In the meantime, with the end of the Cristero War, Aarón had started traveling outside the state of Jalisco, establishing several branch congregations (Rentería Solís 2015, 79–85).

In 1938, the construction of a larger place of worship started in Calle 12 de Octubre, in the south-eastern sector of Guadalajara known as Reforma. In the same year, Aarón asked to be baptized again, in the name of Jesus only, having been reminded during an evangelistic trip to Monterrey that in his first baptism a Trinitarian formula had been used by Silas, rather than the Oneness formula mentioning Jesus only (Dormady 2011, 38). By the early 1940s, La Luz del Mundo had 130 congregations in Mexico with some 2,000 followers (Morán Quiroz 1990, 124).

Several of the first members of La Luz del Mundo came from the different branches of Mexican Oneness Pentecostalism (although most were converts from Catholicism). It is not surprising that they imported into Aarón's movement the quarrelsome attitude and the inclination to schism typical of that Pentecostal milieu. Small groups of dissidents left Aarón in 1932 and 1936 (Rentería Solís

2015, 85 and 95–7), but the largest schism happened in 1942. It was led by José María González (1913–1977), who had been the first pastor ordained by Aarón.

González claimed to have been led to separate from Aarón and establish his own church, called Iglesia del Dios Vivo Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad El Buen Pastor (Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, The Good Shepherd), by divine revelation (Iglesia del Dios Vivo Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad El Buen Pastor s.d., 2010), but scholars agree that the schism was largely determined by personality quarrels. The *casus belli* was the celebration by La Luz del Mundo of the anniversary of Aarón's birth, while González believed that Christians should not celebrate birthdays. The structure, style, and music of El Buen Pastor, which also organizes yearly its own Santa Cena, are largely derived from La Luz del Mundo. The schismatic group, which has a "Templo Mayor" in San Pedro Totoltepec, in the State of México, appears today as a miniature version of La Luz del Mundo, with some 11,000 members. Those who left Aarón in 1942 were around 500 (de la Torre 2000, 80).

The schism was a serious blow to Aarón. Not only had he lost 25% of his followers, including the majority of those who had joined La Luz del Mundo in Mexico City, but the schismatic group had connections in Guadalajara with the authorities and the media. They spread rumors of immoralities in La Luz del Mundo and persuaded the authorities to shut down the temple, although it was soon reopened (Dormady 2011, 42–5).

Aarón symbolically concluded this time of troubles with a baptism. Reporting he was commanded to do so by the voice of God, he re-baptized himself on July 19, 1943. The pastor who had baptized him in 1938, Lino Figueroa, had also defected to El Buen Pastor. Aarón in turn baptized the pastors, and they administered within one week new baptisms to 470 church members who had requested it (Rentería Solís 2015, 120).

Enthusiasm was restored, and the church started growing again. It also started seriously bothering the Catholic establishment, which reacted to the competition by claiming that La Luz del Mundo was simply a political tool created by Calles and reinforced by his successor as President of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas (1895–1970), to harass the Roman Catholic Church (Dormady 2007, 130–31). The argument is still repeated today, and figured prominently in the anti-Luz-del-Mundo campaigns promoted by the Catholic anti-cult priest Flaviano Amatulli Valente (1938–2018, see e.g. Amatulli Valente 1989a, 1989b). No scholar who

has studied La Luz del Mundo agrees with this theory. During the tenures of Calles and Cárdenas, Aarón, his family and his congregation were extremely poor, with no traces of lavish support from the government. While Protestant and other groups received from Calles Catholic churches confiscated by the government, La Luz del Mundo didn't (Pozos Bravo 2001, 39–40; Dormady 2007, 130–33).

Probably, Calles never even heard of La Luz del Mundo during his time in office, which ended in 1928, although La Luz del Mundo supported his anti-clerical measures. Later, the church was somewhat close (but not always nor everywhere: Fortuny 2016) to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Fortuny 2000). Many church members saw it as the legitimate heir of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution and of Benito Juárez (1806–1872) the liberal 19th century President of Mexico who tried to eliminate the privileges of the Catholic Church and is very much appreciated by La Luz del Mundo (Dormady 2007, 165). But neither Calles nor the PRI were crucial for the success of La Luz del Mundo, although *some* local civil authorities in Guadalajara *sometimes* protected Aarón against Catholic opposition (Fortuny 1995).

They did so because of the stated Mexicanness and patriotic attitude of La Luz del Mundo (de la Torre and Fortuny 1991), and also because the new church demonstrably improved the condition of its members. They did not drink alcohol, thus avoiding the problems of drunkenness prevailing in many poor households in the region. They believed in honesty, health, literacy, and education. It is not surprising that the city fathers in Guadalajara looked favorably to Aarón's proposal to establish a colonia in an under-developed part of the city that would be inhabited by Luz del Mundo members (Dormady 2011, 44–7).

Church members had already developed a tendency to gather together, and several has purchased homes near the temple in 12 de Octubre. But they remained a minority there, and were frequently vilified and even assaulted by their Catholic neighbors. Aarón, thus, took advantage of the City Council politics of *fraccionamientos*, acquiring land to the east of Guadalajara's city center. Obtaining the zoning authorizations to build there a full-fledged *colonia* was not easy, but a permission to start building was granted in 1954 (Dormady 2011, 44–51).

The Hermosa Provincia (Beautiful Province) was born, a “colony for the children of God” built around a new temple, and in 1957 the municipal authorities visited it for the dedication, at its entrance, of a monument to Benito Juárez celebrating the hundredth anniversary of his liberal Constitution of 1857 (Dormady 2007, 165). There were further skirmishes with city bureaucrats, reconstructed in great detail in the doctoral dissertation of Jason Dormady, to obtain further authorizations and implement the basic services in the Hermosa Provincia, but in the end Aarón’s dream became a reality (Dormady 2007, 159–83). The Hermosa Provincia was an autonomous, self-sufficient micro-city, and one where criminality and illiteracy were rarer than in other parts of Guadalajara. Illiteracy will completely disappear from the Provincia shortly after Aarón’s death (Greenway 1973, 118). On October 2, 1968, local media reported that the white flag signaling in Mexico that illiteracy has been completely eradicated in a given area had been raised in the Hermosa Provincia (“Auténtica labor alfabetizadora se ha realizado en Hermosa Provincia” 1968).

Aarón could thus devote his later years to spread La Luz del Mundo throughout Mexico and beyond, to Central America and the United States, inaugurating the *giras apostólicas* his successors will greatly develop. He died on June 9, 1964, leaving behind a church with some 12,000 members (according to Moran Quíroz 1990, 124, although Greenway 1973, 121, indicated members were more than 20,000) and communities established throughout Mexico and abroad.

Catholic opposition pursued him even after his death, opposing his burial in Guadalajara’s cemeteries. It was a testament of the good relations La Luz del Mundo had developed with the authorities that the governor of Jalisco, Juan Gil Preciado (1909–1999), personally granted the authorization for a burial in the garden in front of the temple (for which a request for use as a cemetery had already been submitted some months before), which was renamed as Gethsemane (Rentería Solís 2015, 148–51).

Leading an International Church: Apostle Samuel Joaquín Flores

What happened in the aftermath of Aarón’s death was crucial for La Luz del Mundo and its identity. The Apostle of God was dead. After it was announced, a pastor commented that “the lamp of Israel was quenched” (an allusion to 2

Samuel 21:17). The crowd shouted that “no, it was not quenched,” and one church leader renowned for his gift of prophecy indicated that there was indeed a new living Apostle, the seventh child and second surviving male heir of Aarón, Samuel Joaquín Flores (1937–2014) (Torres Álvarez 2016, 92).

There was no pre-arranged protocol on how a new Apostle should be designated after Aarón’s death. Some early accounts insisted on signs showing that Aarón knew that his successor would be Samuel. But there is no principle of dynastic succession in La Luz del Mundo (if there was, it would have privileged Samuel’s brother Santiago [b. 1930], who was also active in the church and was almost seven years his elder). There is no democratic election either. The voice of God speaks to some church leaders, who proclaim who is called to be the new Apostle, and the crowd assembled in Guadalajara shares the same inner feelings and loudly confirms the *elección*. The procedure may seem “opaque” to some scholars (Torres Álvarez 2016, 89), but, from the point of view of La Luz del Mundo, guarantees that Apostles are designated by God rather than by humans (Ávalos Núñez and García de la Mora 2014).

Samuel was born in Guadalajara on February 14, 1937. According to La Luz del Mundo official narrative, he was stillborn and was miraculously resurrected by his father (Rentería Solís 2015, 99–100: the same source claims that Aarón had previously resurrected his daughter Rebeca (1932–1997) after she had suffered a fatal accident). The church also believes that in 1961, when he was the pastor of La Luz del Mundo community in Veracruz, the same voice of God who had spoken to Aarón recited to Samuel the passage of *Revelation 10* mentioning a “mighty angel coming down from Heaven,” and told him, “You will be this angel” (Torres Álvarez 2016, 123). One year later, in 1962, Samuel married Eva García Lopez in the Hermosa Provincia temple.

Samuel inherited a healthy organization, whose size was still limited if compared to the million-strong Catholic Church in Mexico. In order to expand the church, Samuel believed that it was essential to consolidate both its administrative organizations and the infrastructures of the Hermosa Provincia. The latter became a well-serviced part of Guadalajara, with a secondary school, a private university, and a hospital. Samuel also presided over the beautification of the main roads, and the demolition of the first temple, replaced by a larger one in 1969. This was in turn dismantled in 1982 and rebuilt in one of two satellite *colonias* inhabited by Luz del Mundo members in Guadalajara, known as Bethel.

In 1983, the construction of a magnificent new temple, inaugurated in 1992, was started. This seven-level flagship Luz del Mundo structure, with a capacity of 12,000, was designed by Mexican architect Leopoldo Fernández Font. It both symbolized the church's achievements and opened the way to several other architecturally noticeable temples built both in Mexico and abroad (de la Torre 2000, 88).

Samuel, as is typical of the second leaders in new religious organizations, also better structured the church, creating a number of "Ministries" for different fields of activities, from education to public relations, and regulated the relations between different levels of ministers, with pastors at the top, followed by deacons. In 2010, he organized a Council of Bishops, which in case of need could take decisions in the absence of the Apostle, yet remained clearly subordinated to the Apostle himself (Joaquín Flores 2014, 152). Finally, Samuel promoted the historical study of Aarón and the origins of La Luz del Mundo, at a time when the growing church had started being investigated by Mexican scholars, whose approach church members did not always appreciate (see López Maldonado 1995, which criticizes de la Torre 1990).

Armed with a stronger structure at home, Samuel multiplied the apostolic trips, increased international missionary activism, and at his death La Luz del Mundo had expanded well beyond the Americas, to fifty countries, and claimed more than four million members, as a fruit of 50 years of the second Apostle's mission.

Catholic opposition in Mexico also continued, but the most vehement reaction to an expansion that converted La Luz del Mundo into one of the fastest-growing religions in the world came from Protestant anti-cultists. A bizarre character, Jorge Erdely Graham, accused Samuel of sexual abuse and of preparing a mass suicide in 1997, some days after the suicides of members of the American UFO movement Heaven's Gate in Rancho Santa Fe, California (Zeller 2014). Erdely was part of the Evangelical anti-cult organization Instituto Cristiano de México, but was also being accused of leading himself a "cult," the Iglesia Cristiana Restaurada. The latter operated hostels for problematic children, from where several minors "disappeared" in 2009. Escaping prosecution, Erdely left Mexico for the United States and Canada. Nonetheless, there were media that took seriously his accusations against Samuel, supported by some ex-members of La

Luz del Mundo who filed complaints with the state prosecutor in Jalisco, who did not find there any offense to prosecute (see Torres Álvarez 2016, 38–9).

These attacks did not slow down the growth of La Luz del Mundo. At the Santa Cena of 2007, Samuel announced that he had some health problems that may make him less present in the church's future public activities. He remained a beloved figure for La Luz del Mundo community, which offered fervent prayers for his health. He died in Guadalajara on December 8, 2014.

Expansion and Crisis: Apostle Naasón Joaquín García

In a dissertation defended in 2016 at the University of Guadalajara, directed by sociologist Renée de la Torre Castellanos, one of the first scholars to pay attention to La Luz del Mundo, Noé Alejandro Torres Álvarez offered a detailed reconstruction of the *llamamiento apostólico* of Samuel's successor. What for the devotees was God's choice fell on Naasón Joaquín García, the fifth of Samuel's eight children, born in Guadalajara on May 7, 1969. According to Torres Álvarez, the choice was both expected and unexpected. On the one hand, Naasón had been a close aide of his father and Naasón's son, Adoraim, in one of the sermons pronounced during Samuel's funerals, reported a dream where God gave special signs of election to both his father and himself. Torres Álvarez believes that Adoraim was thus offering a clue that Naasón may be the next Apostle—and perhaps himself will one day succeed his father (Torres Álvarez 2016, 159; Luz del Mundo members believe that this interpretation is purely conjectural).

On the other hand, Naasón himself did not have a prominent role in his father's funerals, and within the Joaquín family itself there were uncertainties about whom God may choose. Finally, one pastor, Gilberto García, on December 14 told the multitude gathered to honor the deceased Apostle that a sister from the church had a dream, where she saw Samuel rising to heaven, and told him, "Don't go, for we need an Apostle." Then she saw another man coming down from the clouds, but could not distinguish his face. Finally, she heard a voice proclaiming, "Naasón is my choice." The revelation was immediately greeted by jubilation and prayers, and accepted by Naasón himself and his siblings as genuine (Torres Álvarez 2016, 161, whose version I have supplemented through personal interviews of eyewitnesses to the event, Guadalajara, August 2019).

La Luz del Mundo insists that there are never substantial changes from one Apostle to the next, as the church is the faithful custodian of the original message God entrusted Aarón with. In a fundamental way, this is true. The church remains very much the same, including in its dressing codes, conservative for men, who more often than not wear jackets and ties, as well as for women, who display their long skirts and cover their heads with a veil in the temples (Fortuny 2001). However, La Luz del Mundo also believes that science and progress are gifts from God, and values education.

A University of Florida 2017 dissertation by Mary Puckett had the disadvantage of being based on fieldwork conducted mostly in Florida, where La Luz del Mundo communities are comparatively small, although she did go to a Santa Cena with devotees traveling from Orlando. The Florida microcosm may not be entirely representative of the larger international Luz del Mundo, yet Puckett tells a convincing tale about the globalization—or perhaps, as she prefers, “cosmopolitanization”—of La Luz del Mundo in the first years of Naasón’s apostolate. “A church that once based its identity on being Mexican is now a church with an identity that transcends national borders. Today, it is a church ‘for the world’” (Puckett 2017, 11–2).

Puckett discusses how Naasón, continuing in Samuel’s footsteps, managed to accomplish this between 2014 and 2017. He was successful in mobilizing the church’s youth, both in Mexico and abroad, particularly in the United States, where La Luz del Mundo had experienced a spectacular growth. Youth members enthusiastically joined the “battalions” taking the faith to new cities and new countries. New churches were mushrooming in the U.S. and Central America, and several new countries were reached. By 2019, La Luz del Mundo was present in some 60 countries and claimed five million members internationally—although statistics about new religious movements are always a matter of controversy.

This was an Internet savvy generation, and Naasón worked with them to build an effective network of state-of-the-art web evangelism. He promoted Berea Internacional as an effective tool to broadcast church news. This resulted in further expansion and also, as Puckett argues, guaranteed that globalization would not compromise the integrity of the message. Internet communication works both ways. It allows communities throughout the world to receive messages

from the headquarters, but it also allows headquarters to check out what is going on even in the most remote branches.

This would look like an unimpeachable success story of church growth, if it was not for the fact that in 2019 La Luz del Mundo acquired overnight an international notoriety it would have gladly avoided. On June 3, 2019, Naasón was arrested when he landed at Los Angeles Airport, and detained with several accusations of sexual abuse, including of minors, together with two female associates (a third escaped arrest). At the time of this writing, Naasón is still detained in California. It would be inappropriate to comment on a pending case, and one where so far the prosecutors have not revealed the exact extent of the accusations, who the alleged victims are, and what evidence corroborates their allegations. I attended the Santa Cena in both 2018 and 2019, and noticed both that the number of participants actually grew from one year to the next and that in the enormous crowd of 600,000 everybody was ready to proclaim that the Apostle was innocent. This was a moving testimony of a solid church, confronted with horrific accusations against its leader, yet firm in its faith and trust.

Of course, old and new enemies of La Luz del Mundo painted a different portrait, but their dire predictions about a quick decline of the church after the incident in California did not come true. La Luz del Mundo, actually, continues to grow, and indicates it has no intention of replacing the Apostle, who indeed continues to write letters and take the main decisions for the church from its jail cell.

Time will tell what the fate of Naasón will be, and how the church will react to developments in California. My educated guess is that, whatever the outcome of the California case, the church will survive, and move towards his 100th anniversary with no substantial loss of members. It would not be the first case of a religious movement that has confronted and survived serious crises and ignominious accusations against its leaders.

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The Rise of La Luz del Mundo in Texas

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ABSTRACT: La Luz del Mundo, a large and relatively new Christian denomination, originated in Mexico in 1926 even as the Roman Catholic religious hegemony was being challenged by a spectrum of Protestant and post-Protestant groups. The new church has complex roots, one being the still relatively new Pentecostal movement, which spread from Los Angeles into Mexico early in the twentieth century. La Luz del Mundo was founded by a young Mexican visionary who emerged from an initial contact with God with a unique mission. The Apostle Aarón began to develop his church, La Luz del Mundo (The Light of the World), in Guadalajara. It followed a unique version of Arian Christianity, which recognized the one God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, and additionally restored the office of Apostle to its primary role in church leadership. In 1960, La Luz del Mundo entered Texas, the state where Pentecostalism was receiving its greatest support. In its 60 years of life thereafter, the church has experienced a steady increase in membership year-by-year. Its success in the state has been capped by the construction of a headquarters temple in Houston.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, Pentecostalism, Pentecostalism in Texas, Religion in Texas, Houston La Luz del Mundo Temple.

Note: This article has emerged from a larger project devoted to the production of a history of Pentecostalism in Texas. To date, as this project has proceeded, a series of papers and one monograph have appeared (Melton 2015, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Unreferenced details about La Luz del Mundo in Texas come from interviews and observations made during my fieldwork there in 2019 and 2020.

La Luz del Mundo and Early Pentecostalism

In 2020, members of La Luz del Mundo, a large relatively new Christian denomination that originated in Mexico (Dormady 2011; Greenway 1973;

Ramírez 2015; Fortuny 1995; Fortuny 2002) celebrate the 60th anniversary of the introduction of their church to the State of Texas. La Luz del Mundo (officially Iglesia del Dios Vivo, Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad, La Luz del Mundo, or in English, Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, The Light of the World) traces its beginnings to the ministry of one Eusebio Joaquín González (1896–1964), a soldier serving in the Mexican Army in the mid-1920s. His life would be radically changed in the 1920s when he would, over a relatively short period, move from his Catholic upbringing into a totally new role as a religious leader. Along the way, he would spend a brief time with two itinerant preachers who introduced him to a post-Protestant version of the Christian gospel, while simultaneously providing a context in which he would experience his own direct encounter with God and receive the new revelation that led him to found La Luz del Mundo.

One stream of history leading to the rise of La Luz del Mundo takes one back to 1905 and the relocation of Pentecostal founder Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929), to Texas. Parham's message had initially targeted Holiness believers to whom he identified a new goal in Christian life—the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Holiness people saw their life as a progressive movement that began with their faith in Jesus Christ, the new birth, which would be followed at some later date by a second work of grace, sanctification, in which the root of sin would be removed and they would be made perfect in love (sanctified), and thus fit to enter into the presence of God after death. Parham suggested a third stage in that progression, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which would empower sanctified Christians to live a full Christian life on earth. He also suggested that the reception of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was evidenced by the believer speaking in an unknown tongue.

The new Pentecostal message was initially proclaimed in Texas among a few people in Orchard, not far from Houston, but then experienced a significant response during a series of meetings in Houston during the summer of 1905. Within a few months, it would spread not only through the city but to a host of surrounding communities, where pioneering Pentecostal congregations were established by Parham's band of youthful co-workers (Goff 1989). Not only Anglos, but African Americans and Mexican Americans would be drawn to the new movement. Early in 1906, an African American minister, William J. Seymour (1870–1922), who had accepted the Pentecostal message, though he had yet to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit himself, would travel from Houston to

assume leadership over a small group of believers in Los Angeles, Texas Pentecostalism's first expansion outside of the state (Espinosa 2014; Martin 1999; Robeck 2006).

In Los Angeles, in the spring, a revival would break out within the African American community at a mission Seymour had established on Azusa Street. The Mission would draw many to the city to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and Los Angeles would copy and then surpass Houston as a disseminating point for what would quickly become a national and then global movement.

Just as the movement in Texas attracted Mexican Americans, it would find support in the Spanish-speaking community in southern California, and as news of what was happening at Azusa spread internationally, it would draw Mexicans to Los Angeles to experience the revival directly. While the phase of the revival centered on the original Azusa mission died out in 1909, by that time a handful of Pentecostals congregations had been established in the city, and the Pentecostal scene remained vital in Los Angeles in succeeding years.

Arriving in the city in 1912 from Mexico was Mrs. Romana (Romanita) de Valenzuela, a member of the Congregationalist church, who would stay in Los Angeles for over a year during which she made her initial firsthand contact with the faith. Her sojourn just happened to coincide with the second major controversy to break out within the young movement, around the proclamation of the Oneness message. Oneness, or Jesus Only Pentecostalism, was so designated for its practice of baptism in the "name of Jesus," and its discarding the more traditional formula of baptizing in the name of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Reed 2008). Romanita would return to her Mexican hometown of Villa Aldama, Chihuahua, in 1914, as a fervent Pentecostal. Her enthusiasm would lead to the founding of the first known Apostolic Faith congregation in Mexico. Over the next decade, additional Pentecostal churches were formed that were aligned with the non-trinitarian form of the faith that had emerged in Los Angeles during Valenzuela's residency in the city.

By the mid-1920s, a dozen or more of loosely affiliated Oneness Pentecostal churches using the name Apostolic Church of Faith in Jesus Christ could be found across Northern Mexico. After a decade of relatively steady growth, however, beginning in 1924, their fellowship was disturbed, not by new theological controversy, but by the appearance of two new unusual charismatic leaders, Antonio Muñoz (d. 1935) and Francisco Flores, who had taken the

names Saulo and Silas respectively. Bearded and unwashed, they were quickly identified with the biblical John the Baptist and other prophets, and like them they preached a message of repentance and faith. They called their audiences to denounce their old religion (i.e., Roman Catholicism) and material possessions, and to be rebaptized in the “name of Jesus.” They assumed some additional unique authority from “special divine revelations,” which they had received through their own prophecies, dreams and visions, rather than from any particular study they had made of the Bible—still at the time a rather unknown and unread text for the average Mexican (Holland 1995; Ramírez 2015, 42–5).

A movement emerged around Saulo and Silas as their preaching attracted a following while disrupting the normal life of the Apostolic churches in the decade following their appearance. Their work was even more disruptive as the Apostolic Faith churches were simultaneously undergoing some internal organizational dissention, which resulted in several Apostolic leaders and churches separating and affiliating with the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual (Spiritual Christian Church) based in Tampico, Tamaulipas. This new church had been founded by Scotch-Irish missionary Joseph Stewart (1871–1926) in 1924. Stewart had been a Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary who had made his way to Los Angeles, where he absorbed Oneness teachings. Stewart’s movement in Mexico attracted many former participants of the Apostolic Faith churches. Saulo and Silas also affiliated with the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual (Ramírez 2015, 74–5).

Among those attracted to Saulo and Silas was the young soldier Eusebio Joaquín González. He resigned from the army, and eventually assumed duties as a domestic servant for the preachers. He appears to have dutifully attended to his tasks while listening to the prophets’ teachings. His encounter with the prophetic pair would, however, have different results in the young man’s life from that of the average believer. After being with Saulo and Silas only a short time, Eusebio experienced a divine intervention into his life. On April 6, 1926, he heard God speaking to him calling him to his own particular life’s work, “Your name is Aarón, and I will make it known around all the world, and it will be a blessing” (for more details, see Introvigne, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). In later years, according to those who knew him, Eusebio would state that he mostly learned from his experience with Saulo and Silas and their antinomian lifestyle what *not* to do, and how their kind of disruptive behavior should be avoided by church leaders.

From this direct contact with God, Eusebio Joaquín González emerged as the Apostle Aarón, and almost immediately launched his mission to restoring the doctrine, norms, principles, and sacred traits of the early Christian Church even as he began to preach the message of Jesus Christ to all who would listen. He made his way by foot to Guadalajara, some distance south, finally arriving in December. His entrance into the city happened to coincide with a great celebration, the feast Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, one of the most important for Mexican Catholics (December 12), commemorating the reputed apparition of the Blessed Virgin to a Mexican peasant in 1531. The Apostle condemned the celebration in no uncertain terms. He was concerned that Guadalajara would celebrate

the greatest hoax that our country has received in believing that there exists in the heavens a woman of flesh and blood. And that that woman showed herself on the cloak of an Indian so that the image of the beast would be adored on that date of great meaning to humanity (Ramírez 2015, 77).

At the same time, while he was saddened by the city's devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, he was more than comforted by God's again speaking to him and offering further word of direction, "I want you to preach the Gospel in this city, because I have a great people that will serve me, and this will be proof that I sent you; I will be with you" (Ramírez 2015, 77). Henceforth, Guadalajara would become the center of his life's work to be embodied in La Luz del Mundo.

He began work to grow a church community in Guadalajara and from there extend that same church to the other major cities around the country. As Patricia Fortuny has pointed out, he found strong support among the poorer classes, especially those most negatively affected by the larger socio-economic forces that weighed heavily upon them—the Cristero War, America's Great Depression, and World War II (Fortuny 2002). On the more positive side, the new church profited from some of the overflow of the growing Pentecostal movement in California and Texas, as Mexican converts enjoyed the relatively open border then existing between Mexico and the United States. In Guadalajara especially, the church proved a spirited challenge to Roman Catholicism, which had to some extent grown lazy in attending to the needs of local residents over whom they had enjoyed a virtual monopoly in matters of the sacred.

As the church took shape, much of the new Pentecostalism and its Holiness roots survived. La Luz del Mundo took on the appearance of a conservative Bible-

oriented Protestant church. It affirmed the authority of the Scriptures, salvation in Christ, water baptism, Spirit baptism, and hope in Christ's second coming. Women were to dress conservatively with long dresses, wear no make-up or jeweled adornments, and refrain from cutting their hair. Men had few regulations concerning their appearance, except to keep their hair neatly trimmed. Not as common, at least among Christian groups, the sexes were segregated during worship, the women to one side and the men to the other. Also, common to the time, as an ordained ministry developed, women were excluded from serving as pastors, though, of course, women were invited into a spectrum of non-ordained ministries.

Growth over the first decades of the church's life was steady, if not spectacular. The work into the middle of the century bore visible fruit when in the 1950s the Apostle Aarón was able to purchase some 14 acres of land on the eastern edge of Guadalajara where the church's headquarters would be established. Around the headquarters church members would move into a utopian-like setting, an intentional community where they would construct their own homes in what was designated the "Beautiful Province" (Hermosa Provincia). Here, church leaders could gather to strategize on the international expansion of the church even as they watched the blossoming of the fruits of their labors as the Hermosa Provincia emerged. As the church developed, wherever the concentration of members allowed, additional intentional communities have been founded following the pattern of the initial Hermosa Provincia.

Twenty-five years after the church's founding (1959), it had spread to more than 20 of Mexico's 31 states and made its initial efforts to reach the international community. Meanwhile, along the country's northern border, it was beginning to interact with the emerging American Pentecostal movement that was flourishing along the Rio Grande Valley from Brownsville to El Paso on both sides of the river. Pentecostalism had emerged as a restorationist movement, restoring the charismatic gifts of the Spirit, especially speaking in unknown tongues, to a central place in Christianity. Oneness Pentecostalism had gone further, and attempted to restore the central affirmation of the One God and solve at least one problem of fifth century Christians by elevating Jesus rather than subordinating him. Instead of privileging God the Father, as had previous Oneness theologians, the Pentecostals Oneness thinkers focused their thinking and piety on the Second Person of the Trinity and proclaimed that God's name was Jesus (Reed 2008).

While participating in this restorationist agenda, La Luz del Mundo made two important adjustments. First, the church restored not just the Apostolic Faith in its teachings and practices, but also the apostolic office. The Apostle Aarón and his successors in office are seen as having a special relationship with God and as guiding the church from the knowledge that they alone have received from God the Father and Jesus Christ. The Apostle Aarón and his successors Samuel (1937–2014) and Naasón (b. 1969), are by no means objects of worship, but they have been assigned the highest status in the community and shown respect and deference comparable to that given the original twelve apostles. The great esteem in which the Apostles are held is made visible in each local church, where some prominent acknowledgement of the Apostles as the columns that uphold the church is usually integrated into the front of the main sanctuary. In Texas, at the lead church in Houston, constructed during the tenure of the second Apostle Samuel, a monument of 14 columns was erected—12 for the original apostles and two for the Apostle Samuel and his predecessor.



Figure 1. The monument of apostolic columns, La Luz del Mundo Temple, Houston.

Second, rather than accepting the Oneness perspective of the “Jesus Only” Pentecostals, the Apostle Aarón proposed a perspective that was quite similar to the teachings of Arius (256?–336), the fourth century bishop and theologian whose perspective challenged the emerging trinitarian faith defended by Bishop Athanasius (297?–373), and whose solution to the problem of Christ’s status almost carried the day at the Council of Nicaea before being finally rejected.

Arius and his followers feared that the Trinity veered into tritheism, the worship of three gods. They emphasized God the Father’s supremacy and uniqueness, and reasoned that the Father’s divinity excluded the Son, who was slightly less than the Father in status. Christ shared in the Father’s divinity, but in a derivative sense. This distinction meant that Christ was affirmed as the Son of God and Savior, but not as God in the most complete sense.

In its Statement of Faith, La Luz del Mundo affirms belief in “the existence of God, one and universal, according to what is established in the 1st book of Kings 8:23” in “Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior of the world, according to the book of Acts 8:37: ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” The church’s understanding of the unique nature of Jesus leads it to affirm its belief “that the death of Jesus Christ vindicates man before God, and because of that sacrifice humankind is acceptable and pleasant before God.” These affirmations, which point to the church’s understanding of Christ’s death, have set La Luz del Mundo apart not only from Catholicism, but from both two main branches of Pentecostalism. As the church has grown, its particular theological position has become the object of some exceedingly harsh criticism by its religious competitors.

Entrance into Texas

By 1960, Apostle Aarón was ready to bring his restoration program into what had become Pentecostalism’s greatest area of expansion in the United States—Texas. Previously, Pentecostalism, led by the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the Assemblies of God, and the United Pentecostal Church (UPC), had found its first breakout moments in the state and there, decade by decade, had enjoyed its greatest membership growth in the country. The Texas District (prior to its division into four parts in 1956) was the largest in COGIC, and the same could be said of the Assemblies of God and the UPC.

Apostle Aarón began the 1960s with a visit to Matamoros, a city in Mexico's Tamaulipas state, which sits just across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas. This visit was not, of course, his first to the city. He had originally traveled there in 1934, very early in his apostolic career. On this first visit, he would run into some hostility during his initial attempts to preach to the residents, and would find support from an unexpected quarter, an Anglo preacher, whom he came to know only as Mr. Ball. Ball stood up for him and defended the Apostle when a mob of angry Catholics threatened him for delivering a message quite different from what they believed to be true Christianity. The Apostle unfortunately did not get to know his defender, as each went his separate way when the crowd was dispersed.

It was an intriguing possibility that the Apostle's benefactor might be none other than Henry C. Ball (1896–1989), who was in 1934 serving as the superintendent of the Assemblies of God Mexican work, which was still in its first stages of extending its presence from Texas into Mexico. Ball, who had led the work for more than two decades, would remain in charge of the Assemblies Spanish language work until 1939 when he was succeeded by Demetrio Bazan (1900–1976). However, checking Ball's 1934 schedule, and the oral account of events in 1960, renders that being the case most unlikely.

In fact, during his 1960 visit, the Apostle inquired about the man who had defended him twenty-five years earlier, and learned that Ball was now residing in St. Benito, a town some thirty miles north of Brownsville. He made his way to Ball's residence, confirmed he was the same Ball of the 1934 incident, and during a joyful reunion was able to thank him for his action years previously. In return, Ball was able to point him to at least one person who might be open to receiving the apostle's message. Following their visit, Apostle Aarón and his entourage moved on to San Antonio where they hoped to find one Jesús Lopez, a local preacher whom Ball had suggested he contact. They also sought out two women—Dolores García and Urbana Suárez—whose names had been received from other sources. With the assistance of these three people, La Luz del Mundo would plant its first congregation in the state.

From the initial preaching of the Apostle and the several assisting preachers who accompanied him on the San Antonio trip, a small congregation was formed. On March 20, 1960, Jesús Lopez, Dolores García, Urbana Suárez, and eight additional adults received baptism into La Luz del Mundo. The church's

beginning in Texas is dated from this seemingly humble event. San Antonio had become Mexican America's most important center in Texas, and the congregation would grow steadily, emerging as the center from which the Church would initially expand across the state.



Figure 2. La Luz del Mundo San Antonio Temple.

In 1965, several preachers from San Antonio would bring the message to Houston, where they operated out of a small house for several years before purchasing land on Bostic Street in northeast Houston, where congregants erected a small church building in which they were able to incorporate the unique sanctuary structures that identify La Luz del Mundo's worship centers around the world (Wyatt 2011).

The work in Houston would begin in the wake of a “watershed” event for the church internationally, the death of Apostle Aarón in 1964, and the calling of his son Samuel Joaquín Flores as his successor. I use the term “watershed” in place of another common term, “crisis,” often used in discussing the death of a new religion's founder. In the past, many assumed that the death of a new religion's founder presented a crisis or a trauma threatening the very existence of a new

religion. This assumption, based on a miniscule evidential base, was among the several truisms about new religious movements discarded as new religions studies emerged in the 1970s and 1980 (Nelson 1969; Melton 1985; Robbins 1988; Miller 1991).

The death of the founder is, of course, an important event, which members suffer as a loss, and following which they pause to mourn, before continuing the mission to which the founder has pointed them. Critics, often denigrating first generation religious movements as merely personality cults built around the founders, and hence less than serious religions, assumed that a founder's death took the heart of the religion from it. However, the overwhelming majority of new religions are serious spiritual endeavors, and the death of the one who initially brought to them their faith generally has the effect of spurring them to greater devotion rather than taking their faith from them. Certainly, that was the case of La Luz del Mundo, which in the years after the death of Apostle Aarón, assumed a sharp upward trajectory. In Texas, from the initial congregation in San Antonio, the church spread across the state. Today it is one of the largest Mexican American denominations operating in the state, with more than 80 congregations. Meanwhile in Mexico it was expanding to include more than a million members and emerge as the second largest church in the country.

Progress of La Luz del Mundo in Texas

The move to Houston in 1965 would also prove auspicious for the church. Houston is the largest city in Texas, and would soon replace San Antonio as the base of La Luz del Mundo in the region. A congregation would initially meet at facilities on Hage Street, which it soon outgrew. Members then purchased land on Bostic Street where another church had previously met. That building would be demolished in the 1990s to make way for a new building. That transition would become visible at the end of the 1990s when the land was readied for the construction of the church's new temple, the large building at least partially inspired by St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, with its accompanying mansion-like minister's residence. The building of the temple, principally erected by church members, was begun in 2000 and completed in 2005 (Vara 2005). The church was especially proud of the interior of the temple, whose ornate decorations were both designed and installed by church members.

Meanwhile, as the plans for the new temple were being drawn up and construction begun, other members were spreading out around Houston to launch congregations in places such as Conroe, Freeport, Pasadena (Texas), Victoria, Port Arthur, and beyond. In Houston proper, following the inauguration of the current Bostic temple, the older building on Hage Street sat empty. That site is currently (2020) being renovated to resume prayers again but reflecting the growth of the church among Houstonians of other than Mexican heritage, the services will all be conducted in English (La Luz del Mundo now has six temples across the country where prayers are offered exclusively in English.) Multilingual Pastor Bigvai Estrada leads the Hage temple.

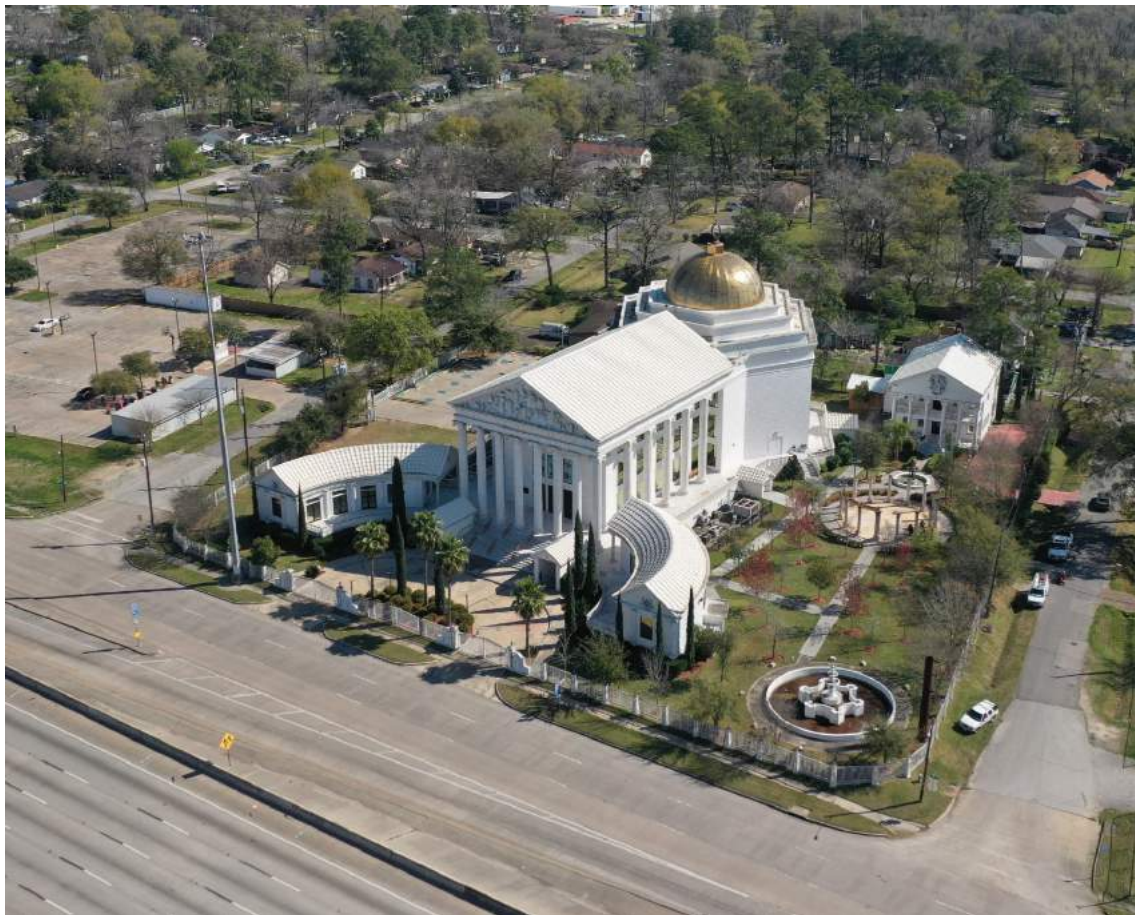


Figure 3. La Luz del Mundo Temple, Houston, Texas.

When the new Bostic Street temple opened in 2005, the Apostle Samuel officiated. The congregation had previously been served by several successive pastors, and the one serving the church in 2000 was Benjamin Joaquín, the founder's grandson.

As La Luz del Mundo became visible in the 1970s, critics representing its religious competitors emerged to attack it both for its proselytizing efforts and its unorthodox theological stance. As it continued to grow, representatives of the cult awareness movement have also arisen, their most virulent assault being launched in the 1990s around a baseless rumor that the church was planning a mass suicide when its members gathered for their annual Holy Supper ritual. Most recently, Apostle Naasón has been arrested and charged with several accounts of sexual abuse, though church leaders maintain that the charges appear to be fabricated and that they expect his full exoneration.

In the twenty-first century, La Luz del Mundo (like Pentecostalism in general) has found itself on an upward trajectory, even as it anticipates the celebration of the centennial of the founding of the church only a few years in the future. While its recent history has not been without some controversy, it has not allowed the obstacles that it has encountered to detract from its continued reaching out to an ever-expanding audience with its message. The question remains as to how long its continued pattern of growth can remain intact.

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The Concept of the Divinity in La Luz del Mundo

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ABSTRACT: Very few scholars have studied the theology of La Luz del Mundo. The article explores the concept of God in La Luz del Mundo and how the church approaches the eternal problems of suffering and happiness. It then examines La Luz del Mundo's vision of Jesus Christ, who is not regarded as "God," nor as "God the Son," but is recognized as "the Son of God," who, through his sacrifice, opened the possibility of salvation, once reserved for the Jews, to the entire humankind.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, Light of the World Church, Theology of La Luz del Mundo, Doctrine of La Luz del Mundo, Christology.

Introduction

La Luz del Mundo believes in God as the supreme creator, and believes in Jesus Christ, Son of God. It does not believe in the dogmatic concept of Trinity as defined in the Roman Catholic Church and accepted by several Protestant denominations, nor does it use the Trinitarian formula in its baptisms. For La Luz del Mundo, God and Jesus Christ form the divinity. In this article, I discuss the theological aspects, or the set of doctrinal knowledge, about the divinity in La Luz del Mundo (of which I am a member).

I examine the concept of divinity in La Luz del Mundo by first applying traditional Weberian interpretations of religion. While these contributions are important, I regard Ken Wilber's approach and his concept of "transcendental sociology" as more useful to understand the theological premises to the notion of divinity in La Luz del Mundo. I will thus briefly review some sociological

concepts, and discuss how they may explain certain principles of the church's theology.

1. Terminology

I refer here to “doctrine” as the set of religious principles related to God, to Jesus Christ, to God's choice of humans for certain roles and positions, and to the aspects that govern the life of the believers in La Luz del Mundo. Besides faith and values, La Luz del Mundo regards the revelation of God as fundamental. For practical purposes, I will not make a distinction between La Luz del Mundo's “doctrine” and La Luz del Mundo's “theology,” the latter being understood as everything related to God and faith in the church.

2. From Weber to Transcendental Sociology

Spanish sociologist Prisciliano Cordero del Castillo states that,

One of the few sociological paradigms that has the general consensus of the majority of sociologists of religion is to consider religion not in its essence, but in its external manifestations, as a social fact (Cordero del Castillo 2001, 239).

By applying this paradigm, La Luz del Mundo is an undeniable “social fact,” yet few, very few scholars have tried to understand its essence, its *raison d'être*, its doctrine. In his traditional work on the sociology of religion, Max Weber (1864–1920) refers to two concepts that are important to understand La Luz del Mundo's notion of God.

The religious interpretation of suffering, as a sign of antipathy to the gods and as a sign of secret guilt, has satisfied, from the psychological point of view, a generalized need. The happy person is rarely satisfied with being so (Weber 1997, 12).

We may add a footnote: in La Luz del Mundo, the happy person is indeed satisfied with being happy. She does not need to know that she has a right to happiness, nor does she understand suffering as a kind of evil inflicted by a God who punishes humans. She is happy because she understands she occupies a place in the divine plan. Unlike Weber, La Luz del Mundo considers that benefits and prosperity are granted by God's intervention, not despite him.

If the general term ‘happiness’ encompasses all the goods of honor, power, possession, and pleasure, this is the most general formula of legitimacy accorded by religion for the benefit of the external and internal interests of all the powerful, owners, triumphant, and healthy. Religion, then, provides happy people with the theodicy of their good fortune (Weber 1997, 12).

Both suffering and happiness are important concepts in Weber’s analysis, yet their respective origin is different. Weber suggests that, when examining a religious faith, we ask the question what is in its view the origin of happiness, and what is the origin of suffering. According to La Luz del Mundo, suffering, in whatever form it may present itself, is a human situation *permitted* by God. Happiness, on the other hand, *has its origin* in God, as every believer is part of the divine plan. Suffering is permitted, while happiness is granted.

The concepts of happiness and suffering, connected with that of the divinity, outline some essential features of La Luz del Mundo. Although they are not “measurable” or “visible” realities, they should not be left out of the conceptual analysis we intend to propose here.

3. *The Supreme Being*

Who, or what, is God? For La Luz del Mundo, God is the Supreme Being *par excellence*. He is the one who has neither beginning nor end or, put another way, the one who is. In the theology of La Luz del Mundo, the reference to Jehovah, the God of Israel, would be the most correct comparison, but not without nuances. Jehovah is to the Jews what God is to La Luz del Mundo; or what Allah is to the Muslim world, God is to this church. Without a name, God is the creator of all things, and the one who provides humans with everything they need. God is spirit (*John* 4:24) and, as the evangelist stated, also requires worship in spirit.

In its theology about God as the creator of the universe, La Luz del Mundo does not share the Darwinian theory of the evolution of the species, nor does it share the Big Bang hypothesis. It believes that the creation of the world was literally carried out according to the narrative in the Book of Genesis. Thus, it also believes that God created Adam from the dust of the earth. After its passage through life, the human body will return to the dust from where it was taken. When God created Adam from the dust of the earth, the book of Genesis tells us that he also blew a “breath of life” (*Genesis* 2:7). For La Luz del Mundo, the

breath of life is the soul, this abstract, intangible entity that, coming from God, allows communication between the human beings and the Creator. When a human life ends, the body returns to the dust of the earth, but the soul, that breath of life that for a time lived in a human body, aspires to eternal life with God and Jesus Christ.

Unlike the God of Israel depicted in the Old Testament, the God of La Luz del Mundo does not drive or promote armed wars, or the conquest of peoples through slaughter. Nor does he promote looting or spoils of war. The “conquest of peoples” mentioned in the Bible is interpreted by La Luz del Mundo in a completely symbolic sense. La Luz del Mundo does practice religious proselytism, but insists that its moral and religious principles should be presented through discernment and rational analysis, avoiding any kind of improper pressure.

La Luz del Mundo believes that the God “who is spirit” mentioned by the evangelist John is the same God who acts today within the church. “He is the God of present actions [...] He is the one who provides all things” (Joaquín García 2017). Unlike the God of Catholicism and other Trinitarian traditions, the God of La Luz del Mundo is regarded as a spirit who cannot be represented in any physical figure. It is the God who walks beside every believer and who “carries him in the hollow of his hand” (Joaquín García 2017). The church member, in turn, believes in the existence of God and trusts him. The believer perceives in the daily life God’s help, care, and protection. Even situations of illness, pain, or sadness are understood by the Luz del Mundo as permitted by the Creator. The believer is called to maintain the faith in God when problems arise. The unbeliever may experience suffering as an opportunity to encounter a loving God.

Members of La Luz del Mundo like to say that they worship God all the time, and that they do so with all their hearts, with all their strength, and above all things (Joaquín García 2017). By having few fixed dates for worship in their calendars, members of La Luz del Mundo understand that at any moment, for any motive or reason, in any circumstance, they serve and recognize God. The present Apostle teaches that the God of La Luz del Mundo is a guarantee of prosperity; with him one never loses (Joaquín García 2017). The believer recognizes in all circumstances the power of the Creator and his work, his action, his intervention.

The God of La Luz del Mundo is also a “jealous God.” He is a God who gives due attention to the believer but also expects exclusive recognition and honor and worship in turn. He only shares the right to be worshiped with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. By sharing this right, God commands believers to worship Jesus Christ as well (*Hebrews* 1:6).

4. Jesus Christ, the Son of God

In the theology of La Luz del Mundo, Jesus Christ is not “God.” Neither is he “God the son.” He is the “son of God.” He is worshipped by commandment of God. Jesus Christ is the origin of all things in God. He is the reason for a divine plan for humankind. La Luz del Mundo quotes *Hebrews* 1:2, “he is the heir of all things, and by him also [God] made the universe.” Jesus Christ is the brightness of God’s glory. He is the highest love (Joaquín García 2017). He is the instrument that God uses to bring to the whole world, not only to Israel, the opportunity of a life after death.

Jesus Christ became the redeemer of the world through his sacrifice. In doing so, he opened the opportunity of an afterlife to all who believe in him. He left behind the monopoly of salvation for Israel, and opened this possibility to every human being. For a believer of La Luz del Mundo, Jesus Christ is “the cause of the march; the beginning and the end of the journey; the alpha and the omega of hope” (Joaquín García 2018).

La Luz del Mundo believes that, since the church was founded in 1926, God and Jesus Christ now act on its behalf. Jesus Christ, though he died on the cross, according to the faith of La Luz del Mundo is found at the right hand of God, enjoying the “glory that [he] had with [God] before the world was” (*John* 17:5). Apostle Naasón shows how these teachings resonate in the present experience of La Luz del Mundo.

Your people were awake [...] this time, Jesus Christ was not alone; this time, an angel did not come to comfort him; this time, we are millions on earth and millions in heaven who worship his name, his love, his surrender, and his sacrifice (Joaquín García 2018).

The relationship of La Luz del Mundo with Jesus Christ is direct. The believers and those who are called to be Apostles adore and worship Jesus Christ (Joaquín García 2018). He is regarded as the church’s advocate before God (*I John* 2:1).

Church members learn that Jesus Christ is the reason and life of believers, and that Jesus' sacrifice for humankind is the greatest sacrifice ever made by any human being (Joaquín García 2015). They are taught that Jesus' sacrifice has not been in vain, as believers in the church now worship Jesus Christ when they know their time has come.

5. The Most Sacred

Divinity is the most sacred reality recognized by La Luz del Mundo. Here, I apply the concept of "sacred things" of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), which is significant insofar as they manifest and exert an influence on society (Durkheim 1984). The life of La Luz del Mundo believers hangs completely from the divinity. They do not believe the statements of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) that divinity is a human-made creation (Feuerbach 2007). For the members of La Luz del Mundo, divinity is an intangible yet undeniable reality.

That divinity, in a secularized world, remains alive and well as the supreme concept of the sacred for a significant number of believers, allows for some theoretical reflections. Religion does not disappear in a secularized world (although it may move into the sphere of private life), since it remains a necessary and legitimizing force for the majority of human beings. Peter Berger (1929–2017) once wrote that humans continue to construct their religious cosmos as an immensely powerful reality (Berger 1975).

I mentioned above Ken Wilber's "transcendental sociology" (Wilber 1983), summarized by Cordero del Castillo in the following terms,

In his new model of sociological analysis, Wilber starts from the premise that the religious fact is linked in an essential way to human nature. Since, when studying different manifestations of the social, we always find human beings as subjects and objects of everything social. But humans are at the same time world (corporeality), mind (consciousness), and spirit (transcendence). Dispensing with some of these dimensions or levels of realization would lead us to fall into a new anthropological reductionism (Cordero del Castillo 2001, 246).

Transcendental sociology is relevant to interpret the relationship La Luz del Mundo maintains with God and Jesus Christ. In the world of faith of La Luz del Mundo, Wilber's three conceptual categories of embodiment, consciousness, and transcendence are manifested and lived every day. Believers use their bodies,

their minds, and their spirit to manifest, in their daily life and in their actions, their faith in God and Jesus Christ. God is the cosmovision of La Luz del Mundo believers.

Final Thoughts

Transcendence beyond this life is at the core of the experience and faith of La Luz del Mundo believers. Transcendence becomes one of the fundamental theological axes that are directly linked to divinity. Without Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, there is no chance of salvation for the believer. Nor could we have been saved without God's plan for humanity.

The notions of God and Jesus Christ of La Luz del Mundo have a central place in its doctrine and theology. However, in order to fully understand La Luz del Mundo, other themes should be examined in future studies, including life after death and how God chooses his representatives and speaks through revelation. Here, further studies will find great and substantial differences between La Luz del Mundo and other faiths.

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La Luz del Mundo's Social and Charitable Activities

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ABSTRACT: Before it acquired an international notoriety for the arrest of its current leader in California on charges of sexual abuse in 2019, La Luz del Mundo was well-known and respected in various quarters for its massive social and charitable activities. The article explores the origin of those activities in La Luz del Mundo's interpretation of both Christianity and the values of the Mexican Revolution, and their development in the fields of education, health care, charity, gender equality, and the prevention and relief of domestic violence, concluding with a look at possible future developments after the current crisis.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, Light of the World, Samuel Joaquín Flores, Eva García de Joaquín, Naasón Joaquín García, Alma Zamora de Joaquín, Sàmann University of Jalisco, Hospital Siloé, Alma de Mujer y Vida.

After the arrest of its Apostle on charges of sexual abuses on June 3, 2019 in California, international media that knew nothing about it all of a sudden “discovered” La Luz del Mundo as a “sinister” organization or a “cult.” Much to their surprise, in the following days, those media that did a modicum of homework learned that La Luz del Mundo was held in high esteem by politicians and civil society leaders in different countries because of its social and charitable activities.

In August 2019, I visited Guadalajara and conducted fieldwork there among the organizers and volunteers carrying on this social work (unreferenced information in the article comes from these interviews). What follows is a short analysis, and an attempt to answer the question why both members and sympathizers, as several media noticed, continued to regard La Luz del Mundo as

an honorable organization even after the serious accusations raised against the private life of the Apostle.

Building the Hermosa Provincia

As historians have noted, most of the original members of La Luz del Mundo came from the poorest segments of Mexican society (Dormady 2007, 2011). These were the very Mexicans who had believed in the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, and had shared its criticism of the Catholic Church as an institution accused of having sided for decades with the rich and the landowners. The poor had supported the Revolution not because they shared an ideology, but in search of a social justice long denied. Those who joined La Luz del Mundo had also supported the revolutionary government against the Catholic revolt of the Cristeros during the Cristero War of 1927–29.

When the dust settled, however, they discovered that, although there had been some improvements, the revolutionary ideal of social justice had largely proved elusive. The rich remained rich, and the poor remained poor. This fueled Catholic, and at the opposite side of the spectrum, hard-line Soviet-style Communist criticism of the government. La Luz del Mundo, however, believed that in order to be good Christians their members should be good citizens. With all its shortcomings, the church considered that what was called originally National Revolutionary Party, then Party of the Mexican Revolution, and from 1946, Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico without interruptions from 1929 to 2000, still offered a chance to pursue the ideals of the *Revolución* and of the great liberal 19th-century President, Benito Juárez (1859–1872). Although La Luz del Mundo did not identify with a single political party (Fortuny 2016), it is fair to state that, unlike other Mexican religious bodies, it worked *within*, rather than *outside* or *against*, the PRI-centered Mexican political and social system (Dormady 2011).

La Luz del Mundo theology believes that science and progress—which were also core values of the Mexican Revolution—are God-given gifts to all humankind and eminently Christian principles. Education and freedom from diseases, violence, superstition, and ignorance should be offered to all and, by working at it, Christians also work for the Kingdom of God. However, in its first decades of existence, the struggling La Luz del Mundo community was mostly busy

promoting these values among its own members, who gathered in the new City of God the movement built in Guadalajara, the Hermosa Provincia.

When the Hermosa Provincia came into existence in 1954, most new developments in Guadalajara, outside of the city center, had no sewage, electrification, or potable water. By the 1957, the Hermosa Provincia had a monument to Benito Juárez, but it also provided its inhabitants with the basic services (de la Torre 2000, 82), although they were completed and improved in the following years (Dormady 2007, 167). The founder of La Luz del Mundo, Aarón Joaquín González (1896–1964), had been himself a schoolteacher (Rentería Solís 1997, 36) and personally took care of the basic schooling of the Provincia's children. He also promoted the birth of private businesses ran by La Luz del Mundo members there, including bakeries, food stands, and a packing company of salsa. They were encouraged to use part of the profits they made to build an informal charity network for the poor and the elderly of the Provincia, the first embryo of the future charitable system of La Luz del Mundo (Dormady 2007, 173–74).

Although a hospital will start functioning only in the next decade, obstetrical services were already provided in the 1950s. In the Provincia the rate of stillborn children, a serious problem in Mexico, dropped from 10% in the mid-1950s to zero in 1964. By the 1960s, illiteracy, another problem the Mexican Revolution had promised (without always keeping its pledge) to eradicate, had also disappeared in the Provincia (Dormady 2007, 175).

As mentioned earlier, the “good citizens” ideal of La Luz del Mundo led members to carry on these activities within the prevailing political and social system of Mexico. President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1897–1955), who was in office between 1940 and 1946, had created a Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (National Confederation of Popular Organizations, CNOP) as an umbrella organization connecting all sort of civil society groups to the PRI. There were also state branches of the CNOP, including in Jalisco, in turn federating local organizations at the city, village, and boroughs levels. One of this was Guadalajara's Liga Municipal de Diversos no. 4, active in the sector including the Hermosa Provincia. According to American scholar Jason Dormady, not only did Apostle Aarón supported the Liga, he encouraged La Luz del Mundo members to devote time and energies to it. Aarón's own son, Samuel Joaquín Flores (1937–2014), later to become La Luz del Mundo's second Apostle,

served as chief financial officer of the Liga no. 4 (Dormady 2007, 177–78). But, if they were there, they acted as individual Mexican citizens, not as representatives of the church.

Educational Institutions

Apostle Samuel, who succeeded his father in 1964, completed the process of creating stable social institutions in the Provincia. Samuel was especially passionate about promoting one of La Luz del Mundo's key values, education. The first establishments for primary education in the Provincia were created during the apostolate of Aarón, but the following chronology shows the substantial impulse given by Samuel to educational institutions there:

1976. The construction of a new building for the primary public school Benito Juárez was started.

1976. The junior high school (*secundaria*) Hermosa Provincia 1 started operating in a building known as Albergue México.

1977. The junior high school Hermosa Provincia 1 moved to its own building.

1979. The kindergarten Hermosa Provincia 1 was founded.

1983. A second kindergarten, Hermosa Provincia 2, started functioning in the Colonia Bethel.

1987. Another junior high school, Hermosa Provincia 2, was inaugurated in the Colonia Bethel.

1990. The first high school (*preparatoria*) in the area, Hermosa Provincia 1, was inaugurated.

1992. The third junior high school, Hermosa Provincia 3, was inaugurated in the Colonia Aarón Joaquín.

1993. Recab de México A.C. was established as an umbrella organization supervising all the educational institutions of the Hermosa Provincia (IEHP).

1993. The University Center of Higher Education Hermosa Provincia (CUESHP) started operating.

2003. Sàmann University of Jalisco was inaugurated.

2005. An equivalency high school (*preparatoria semiescolarizada*), i.e. a high school for workers or adults seeking to complete their scholarly career, was also opened.

2009. IEHS started offering courses for a secondary education diploma with technological orientation (*bachillerato tecnológico*).

2012. A new school building was inaugurated in the Colonia Bethel (currently hosting the junior high school Hermosa Provincia 2).

2012. Sâmann University of Jalisco created a new campus in Tijuana.

Under Apostle Naasón, who succeeded his father Samuel in 2014, a significant development took place. Sâmann University and CUESHP became in 2019 different educational systems, both under the ultimate supervision of Recab, but with different “concepts” and trademarks. CUESHP emphasized its offer of a “secular education,” officially accredited by the main public university in the State of Jalisco, University of Guadalajara, while Sâmann University declared its Christian orientation. It is important to note that today between 80% and 85% of the students in the global IEHS system and Sâmann University are *not* members of La Luz del Mundo.

Health Services: The Siloé Hospital

Apostle Samuel also organized the various activities of La Luz del Mundo into departments known as Ministries, including a Ministry of Health and Welfare. Apostle Aarón had started building a health institution later known as Instituto Fraternal Maestro Aarón Joaquín in the Hermosa Provincia’s Calle Esteban Alatorre, but it was not completed at the time of his death in 1964. Apostle Samuel continued its construction and inaugurated it on April 6, 1965. However, he had more ambitious projects for the health services offered by La Luz del Mundo, and dreamed of building a state-of-the-art hospital.

The project for Hospital Siloé was started in February 1987, and the institution was inaugurated in June 2001. It was named after Jerusalem’s pool of Siloam, where Jesus according to *John 9* sent the man born blind to wash his eyes after he had spread mud over them. The blind man went to Siloam, washed his eyes, and was healed.

Siloé became a fully structured hospital, with several divisions and an Administrative Council presiding over four departments: medical, building and projects, planning and quality control, and administration. Quite appropriately for an institution named after the story of the healing of a blind man in the Gospel, it was later supplemented by a cutting-edge Institute of Ophthalmology, named after Apostle Samuel himself. The Institute is specialized in the prevention and cure of glaucoma and cataract, which are widespread problems in the region. Siloé also includes an accredited college, the Instituto Siloé Jalisco de Ciencias de la Salud, offering a license in Optometry as well as professional certificates for nurses and paramedics.

My visit to the Siloé Hospital in 2019 evidenced three points that are typical of La Luz del Mundo's mature approach to social activities in general. First, La Luz del Mundo believes in science and is critical of other religious organizations that maintain anti-scientific prejudices. The hospital is proud of its high quality and advanced services. At the same time, Apostle Samuel believed that too many hospitals lack the human touch that is also needed to make the patients comfortable. He wanted Siloé to look less like an hospital and more as a home away from home for the patients. He advised the doctors that there is no substitute for love, and patients should feel loved there.

Second, Siloé is clearly a Christian institution, and does not hide its ties with La Luz del Mundo. The portraits of the Apostles are proudly displayed. Medical and administrative personnel are told that the hospital believes in Christian values, and they are expected to abide by them.

Third, as interpreted by La Luz del Mundo, Christian values imply that services—after the early years when resources allowed only to provide for the members of the religious community—should now be offered to everybody, without distinction of religion or belief. Siloé is a private hospital and is not for free, although it is cheaper than most other hospitals in the area, and there are plans to help those in need. That non-members of La Luz del Mundo benefit of the same services offered to members is a key point and, as mentioned earlier, also applies to education. It explains why, for all the theological controversy denouncing the church as “heretic,” La Luz del Mundo is popular among many Mexicans (and, increasingly, non-Mexicans, as parallel or branch institutions have been created abroad) who experience the quality and care of its social services. This is also true for fields other than the medical one.

Lengthening the Stride of Charity: The Fundación Eva García de Joaquín

Eva García Lopez was born on September 15, 1945, and married the future Apostle Samuel on May 17, 1962. The main religious festival of La Luz del Mundo is known as Santa Cena (Holy Supper). It was first celebrated in 1931, and grew to become a massive international event (Fortuny 2002). Not all those who come to Guadalajara for the Santa Cena from all over the world are well off. Many are poor. Eva García conceived the idea of offering at least free meals to them, and on November 8, 1986, founded for this purpose the Grupo Tabita, named after Tabitha, the Christian woman resurrected by Apostle Peter in *Acts* 9:36–42.

Eva realized that Tabita could not be active only during the Santa Cena or immediately before it. It needed to work all year round to raise the funds needed to feed an increasing number of pilgrims in need. Its activities, and the number of volunteers, kept growing, and on January 9, 1992, it was reorganized as Grupo Elisa. The name honored the late mother-in-law of Eva, and Apostle Aarón's loyal wife of sixty years, Elisa Flores (1902–1985).

On January 11, 1999, the former Grupo Elisa was legally incorporated as the Fundación Elisa A.C. On September 18, 2000, it inaugurated the Casa Hogar Betesda, a nursing home offering spiritual as well as material assistance to the elderly. On November 4, 2011, the name of the foundation was changed to Fundación Eva García de Joaquín A.C., honoring its indefatigable founder.

Following a pattern common to several La Luz del Mundo social institutions, the foundation expanded into three directions. First, it broadened its activities, from feeding those in need coming for the Santa Cena to assisting the poor and the elderly all year round. Second, it grew geographically, outside Guadalajara and then outside Mexico. Third, it became part of an international network of charitable organizations and services extending its help to non-members of La Luz del Mundo as well, including in different parts of the world in situations of emergency and disaster. We noted a similar expansive pattern when discussing the schools and the hospital. Critics of La Luz del Mundo have accused its charitable institutions to help undocumented migrants in the United States. But the same assistance is offered by other Christian churches, and La Luz del Mundo's willingness to help without looking at the religion, ethnicity, or legal status of those in need seem worthy of praise rather than criticism.

Protecting Women in Danger: Alma de Mujer y Vida A.C.

Alma de Mujer y Vida (Soul of a Woman and Life) is the most recent social institution of La Luz del Mundo, and the most moving I visited. It also offers a window on how La Luz del Mundo answers certain forms of criticism.

La Luz del Mundo women are immediately recognized for their long skirts and the veil they keep during the religious services, where they seat separately from men (Fortuny 2001). Outside observers, and the first scholars who studied La Luz del Mundo, suspected that these external signs were the mark of a patriarchal culture discriminating against women (see de la Torre 2000). The church resented these comments as offensive (López Maldonado 1995), as it sincerely believed to have contributed significantly to the improvement of the condition of its women through health care and education. As late as 2019, one of La Luz del Mundo's leading female intellectuals, Sara Pozos Bravo, wrote an op-ed in a Guadalajara daily newspaper explaining that stretching skirts never meant cutting rights shorter for the church's women (Pozos Bravo 2019a).

It is certainly true that La Luz del Mundo is not feminist, and only men serve as pastors there. An outside observer can perhaps comment that this is part of Mexican culture: after all, there are no women priests in the Catholic Church either. On the other hand, the fact that they cannot become pastors (and dress conservatively) does not prevent La Luz del Mundo women from pursuing academic degrees or serving in leading positions in church-sponsored activities such as health care, education, and journalism. The church's main charities are led by women.

La Luz del Mundo is headquartered in Mexico, a country which became notorious for the prevalence of violence against women, including domestic violence. Even apart from hundreds of unsolved homicides of young women in Ciudad Juárez, an obscure set of horrific events that was popularized internationally by the 2006 Hollywood movie *Bordertown*, starring Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas, women are more often victims of violence in Mexico than in most other countries. In 2016, the national institute for statistics INEGI reported that 66,1% of Mexican women had been victims of violence at least once in life, and 43,9% had been physically assaulted by their husbands or partners (INEGI 2016). An often quoted article published in 1996 by the

Journal of the American Medical Association claimed that the most dangerous place for a Mexican woman is her home (Díaz Olavarrieta and Sotelo 1996).

La Luz del Mundo women insists on the paradox that they are criticized for their long skirts, yet the church's teachings on familial harmony, and the prohibitions against alcohol and drugs, a main cause of violence in Mexico, protect them against incidents all too common in their country. They are not above discriminations in the workplace and other forms of gender inequality, though. One person who felt these problems should be addressed urgently, in Mexico and beyond, was Alma Zamora Espinoza, the wife of La Luz del Mundo's third Apostle, Naasón Joaquín García (they married on June 14, 1992).

On March 8, 2016, Alma Zamora founded the association Alma de Mujer y Vida. Perhaps not coincidentally, the name of the association included her own first name, Alma. It offers a large and indeed impressive range of services to women, from free legal and psychological services to courses on how to prevent domestic violence and resist discrimination in the workplace. It also offers free courses to improve the women's employment skills, in order to help their careers, and several kind of health care services, including nutritional advise in a country where obesity is a social plague.

Thousands of women went through the programs of Alma de Mujer y Vida, most of them not members of La Luz del Mundo, where domestic violence issues are *less* prevailing than in Mexican society at large. The strategical aim is also clear: to those who accuse La Luz del Mundo of perpetuating a patriarchal culture, the church answers that in fact it operates one of the leading charities in Mexico promoting gender equality and fighting discrimination and domestic violence.

All this is advanced within the framework of a broader interest for human rights. If the theme of separation of church and state—which in Mexico traditionally means containing the power of the Catholic Church—is part of the values of the Mexican Revolution La Luz del Mundo has promoted since its very beginning, under Apostle Naasón the church has become more active in participating in global human rights initiatives, including at the United Nations (Pozos Bravo 2019b).

Conclusion

Christians in general believe in the Kingdom of God, and that a better world will one day come. As American scholar Catherine Wessinger has noted, the parts of the Book of Revelation in the Bible that announce what many Christians call the Millennium, a kingdom of peace that will last for a thousand years, are interpreted differently by Christian denominations and movements. Some believe that Christians should simply wait for Jesus to appear again and inaugurate the Millennium, and perhaps try to find in the Bible words mysteriously indicating the date for the end of the world as we know it. Others practice what Wessinger calls “progressive millennialism,” i.e. they believe that God asks for our cooperation, and the Millennium will only come after a certain number of women and men will have prepared it with sincere heart and manifested their love and care for their fellow human beings in need (Wessinger 1997).

La Luz del Mundo is a progressive group, and tries to build a model Christian society where nobody is left behind or forgotten. Its members do believe in the supernatural, but do not wait for miracles when they felt called to demonstrate their Christian attitude in practice, by helping every day those in need.

During my fieldwork in Mexico, what surprised and deeply moved me was the obvious sincerity, selflessness, purity of heart, and humility of thousands of volunteers performing their daily tasks for the practical greater good of the others. They did not believe they were doing something exceptional, and in fact needed to be told by me that their commitment to a wide-ranging humanitarian work was simply outstanding. Instead of praising themselves, they kept praising God and their Apostles who, according to them, have been their main inspiration and guidance.

La Luz del Mundo humanitarian work has a global scope. It extends to all the communities where the church is present, to the benefit of both church members and non-members who live nearby. Nor is their work limited by ethnicity. As I was able to confirm by visiting La Luz del Mundo communities in the United States, it is true that many recipients of their benevolence are Mexican immigrants, but non-Mexicans and non-Latinos are helped as well.

All stages of human life are taken care of by La Luz del Mundo volunteers. For children, not only does the church promote education, but in the neighborhoods where there is a significant La Luz del Mundo presence, there are in principle no

abandoned children. If their parents die or are not able to take care of them, La Luz del Mundo families in the neighborhood will be ready to adopt the children. As we have seen, women are helped to develop professional skills and to avoid being abused in the family and elsewhere. I also observed family consultancy courses where both partners learned new communication skills, and rescued their marriages when they were at the verge of separation. I met several young couples who had been helped to solve their problems and rebuild a renewed and solid relationship. La Luz del Mundo believes in the simple principle that a strong and happy family makes for a strong and healthy society.

Hospitals care for the sick, and there are no abandoned senior citizens where La Luz del Mundo has a significant presence. I saw myself how, in foster homes, senior citizens are often surrounded by young people and children. They are included into social life and there is a sustained effort to make them feel loved, not only taken care of. It was particularly moving to see several generations spending time and energy together, something which is becoming uncommon in our society.

A casual or perhaps hostile reader may ask at this point how it is possible to discuss the charitable activities of La Luz del Mundo as if the court case pending in California against Apostle Naasón for multiple charges of sexual abuse did not exist. Isn't it contradictory that the church has established a large organization for combating the very abuse of women its leader is now accused of?

As it often happens, the question has two sides. Critics may maintain that it is hypocritical for church members to help a good number of victimized women and at the same time defend their Apostle from serious accusations of having victimized other women himself. For La Luz del Mundo devotees persuaded that the Apostle is innocent, however, precisely his honorable activities in the field of charity, education, and human rights make the idea that he has committed the kind of crimes he is accused of unbelievable. Instead, those I interviewed consider that through the trial of the Apostle, God is telling something important to them and is testing their faith.

I am not in a position to offer any comment, much less conclusions, on the California case, but I believe that there is one aspect worth considering. Whatever one may think, or the U.S. judges may rule, about Apostle Naasón, nothing and nobody can cancel the massive amount of good works performed by thousands of La Luz del Mundo volunteers to help the women, the immigrants,

the poor, the sick, the elderly, lending their helping hands to both members and non-members of their church. Tens of thousands who have been helped throughout the world will remain grateful to La Luz del Mundo, no matter what they may hear about the Apostle. This is a human and social capital La Luz del Mundo has accumulated through its members' benevolence. It will help it in the difficult times ahead, and I believe it will assure to La Luz del Mundo a stability lasting much beyond the present crisis.

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Field Report: The Light of the World in Greater Los Angeles

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We will always be by your side, we have promised to the Lord,
We will never stray from your side, you're Anointed by our God;
Our hearts are overflowing and give glories to the Lord,
For HE made you an Apostle for salvation of our souls.

"All Glory Be to God," English translation of Andres Orduna Arguello's
"La Gloria Sea a Dios," *The Light of the World Hymnal* (2018, 578)

ABSTRACT: La Luz del Mundo (LLDM, "The Light of the World") is a Mexican-born restorationist or "primitive" Christian church that dates to the 1920s. Under the leadership of its second Apostle, Samuel, and now under the guidance of its third Apostle, Naasón, LLDM has increasingly sought to expand its base beyond Mexico (where it is the second largest religious group after the Catholic Church) and now boasts a presence of millions in over 50 nations. This short article, based on fieldwork conducted at churches in southern California, surveys the church's history in the Greater Los Angeles Area and examines some forms of LLDM community and non-profit engagements. The tight community networks established by LLDM members around places of worship have contributed to social improvements (decreased crime, increases in home value, opening of businesses, increased civic participation and recognition from local authorities, etc.). This phenomenon was evident in East Los Angeles, where hundreds of members live in the neighborhood that surrounds the most significant LLDM temple in the region.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, The Light of the World, Religion in Los Angeles, Religion in California, Fieldwork – Religious Groups, Restorationist Theology, Lived Religion.

Introduction: LLDM as a NRM

Scholars of La Luz del Mundo (LLDM, “The Light of the World”) have typically approached the group from the perspectives of Protestant and Latin American history and, not surprisingly, have therefore tended to emphasize the group’s similarities to, and roots in, Pentecostalism (Nutini & Nutini 2014, 76; Fortuny 1995, 2016; de la Torre 2000); however, there has been little scholarly attention to the ways in which LLDM qualifies as a Mexican-born and globalized new religious movement (NRM) (Masferrer 1997). To be fair, its restorationist theology—which has been explored in the literature (Dormady 2007)—problematizes the label of “new religion” in much the same way that it does for, say, Mormonism, another restorationist tradition with North American origins that has gone global. However, the “NRM lens” is helpful to better understand LLDM’s strategies of community outreach and legitimation as it continues to expand across the world where it is new and unknown (Greenway 1973; Biglieri 2000; Puckett 2017). In this field report, I offer a short history of LLDM in southern California, followed by my observations of temples in East Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles, and Long Beach from my perspective as a researcher of new religious movements. I focus most of my attention in this report on the church’s temple in East Los Angeles, where I witnessed the role of community and tight social networks in improving social conditions, evidenced by decreased crime in the face of gang violence, increases in home value, the opening of new businesses, increased civic participation, and recognition from local authorities.

LLDM in Southern California

According to LLDM (Estrada 2020), the church’s presence in southern California traces to October 1955, when the first Apostle and leader of the group, Aarón Joaquín González (1896–1964), paid a visit to Los Angeles. He was invited by a Mexican national, Dr. Alfonso García Osorio (1917–2010), who, according to LLDM, “convinced the Apostle to come to the United States with the promise that in the United States there was freedom of speech and freedom of religion” (Estrada 2020). There, the Apostle Aarón was evidently impressed with the freedom of evangelizing Protestant ministers in places such as Olvera Street in Los Angeles (adjacent to Chinatown and, one might add, near Little Tokyo, home to the Azusa Street Pentecostal revival that took place four

decades earlier). LLDM's earliest ecclesiastical presence was a house church located at San Pedro and 87th Street (Estrada 2020), and indeed house churches continue to function as mission locations in areas where temples are too remote. Members soon outgrew this location, however, and relocated across the street from the future location of the LLDM temple in East Los Angeles. The church continued to expand, and in the early 1970s LLDM purchased land at 112 North Arizona Avenue, where church members built the current temple themselves, drawing from the skills and strengths of the membership that lived in the surrounding area. The East Los Angeles temple seats over 1,000 and was inaugurated by LLDM's second Apostle, Samuel Joaquín Flores (1937–2014), in 1985 (see figure 1). In 2005, Apostle Samuel visited the church in Los Angeles to celebrate the 50th anniversary of LLDM's ministry in the area.



Figure 1. East Los Angeles temple, 1985 inauguration.
Photograph provided by Bigvai Estrada.

Site Trips: East Los Angeles, Downtown Los Angeles, Long Beach

During a visit to southern California LLDM sites in January 2020, organized by ministers Bigvai Estrada and Jack Freedom, I visited temples in East Los Angeles (112 North Arizona Avenue), downtown Los Angeles (901 West Washington Blvd), and Long Beach (785 Junipero Avenue). The temples in Long Beach and downtown LA (see figures 2 and 3, respectively) were smaller in size than the main East LA temple, each seating approximately 150–200. All three primarily serve Spanish speakers, although services are available in English through the use of translators. I was told that LLDM, in an effort to internationalize itself beyond a Mexican-born group, has opened several churches in the United States where English is the exclusive language. English-speaking temples include Redlands, California and Houston, Texas, among a handful of others.

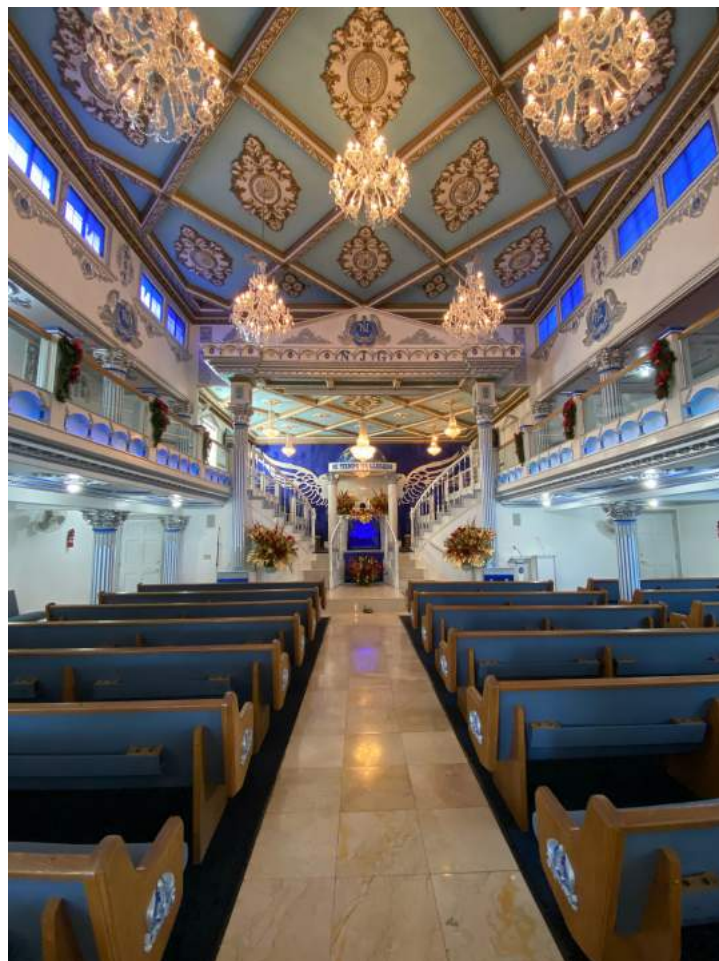


Figure 2. Interior, Long Beach temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.



Figure 3. Interior, downtown Los Angeles temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.

The temples in downtown Los Angeles and Long Beach are two stories tall and include ornate decorations and Jewish and Christian iconography on the walls. Notably, the initials of the current Apostle, Naasón Joaquín García, are found in the main sanctuaries (see figure 4), just as they are in East LA, as a sign of respect for the leader. In fact, I noticed that the stylized initials *NJG* likewise formed the basis of a sticker found on the back of LLDL members' cars as well, which serves as an outward identifier that has religious utility in the car-driving culture of California. Another distinguishing feature, common to all the temples I visited, is the placement of a seat of honor reserved for the Apostle Naasón in front of the altar. The pulpit in each temple, one notices, is set off to the side of the stage, which I am told serves to emphasize the elevated status of the Apostle in relation to the local minister and other speakers. I was also struck by the prominence, at the entrance of the temples, of hand sanitizers to ensure cleanliness and purity once in the temple. Even more striking, however, is the placement of lion statues (with the paw held up) in some temples, such as East Los Angeles and downtown Los Angeles. Finally, I was intrigued to learn that each temple has a neighboring or nearby house for the minister and his family. Full-time ministers serve for three

years before rotating to a new location to be determined by senior LLDM leadership.



Figures 4. Initials of Apostle Naasón Joaquín García, at entrance to downtown LA temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.

My visit to the main California temple in East Los Angeles was notable for several reasons. First of all, it was older than the others I visited in southern California, and it became clear that it is an important ecclesiastical site—some of my guides referred to it as the “Mother Church” in the region—as well as a center of community. As we drove through Monterey Park toward the temple, the presence of LLDM members on the sidewalk was pointed out. My guides parked their cars at the temple, and we then proceeded to walk around the block. Jack Freeman, a white American, and his Mexican-American wife, Rael, described the history of the LLDM in the area (as recounted in the previous section), as well as

the discrimination, harassment, and vandalism Jack faced by the non-LLDM Hispanic community.

The neighborhood around Arizona Avenue was once the site of intense and ongoing gang violence, especially between 1970 and 2000, with rival gangs positioned on their own side of the block, with the temple caught directly in between (Estrada 2020). As more LLDM members moved into the area, they initiated a “beautification project” (Estrada 2020), in which gang safe houses were purchased and, slowly but surely, crime rates decreased in the area (corroborated by Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department 2012; Los Angeles County 2018; Los Angeles Police Department 2020; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2020), property values rose (Los Angeles County Office of the Assessor, 2020; Zillow 2020a, 2020b), and new businesses opened (recent examples I discovered were Subway, Denny’s, and a number of local markets). The church received recognitions of its service to the community from the County of Los Angeles (Burke 2001) and Governor of California (Davis 2003). I discovered a vestige of this gang history in an alley that featured a mural—not produced by LLDM members, I am told—lamenting the senselessness of gang violence and the lives lost in decades past (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Mural in an alley near East LA temple, January 2020. Photograph by author.

Today, the area surrounding the temple is quite safe and walkable, and my guides told me that most of the residents in the vicinity—at least 75% by their estimate—are LLDM members. Walking around the block, my guides pointed out the occasional house that was not owned by an LLDM member, and these were typically in some state of disrepair, in sharp contrast to the homes of church members with clean yards, fresh paint, newer automobiles, and families seen playing in the front and backyards.

My observations of social improvement in East Los Angeles align with the findings of other researchers of LLDM, including scholars who are otherwise quite critical of the church (de la Torre 2000). One conspicuous and relatively recent example is the 2014 anthropological monograph of Hugo and Jean Nutini, who—quite recklessly and inappropriately, in my mind—refer to LLDM as a “destructive sect” similar to People’s Temple, Order of the Solar Temple, and Heaven’s Gate (2014, 38) and “basically a theocracy, geared to the exploitation of the faithful under strict social control” (2014, 80). Later in the book, however, they go on to praise the *local* LLDM communities they observed across Mexico (i.e. in Fortín, Orizaba, and Tlaxcala) for “the mutual assistance that characterizes the organization of the congregation” (2014, 82) that comes from “the close proximity in which the majority of the faithful live to congregations of LLDM” (2014, 85). Citing LLDM’s “strongly held belief in self-help and support for individual members” (2014, 87), they conclude that “the most positive aspect of LLDM congregations is the pervasive atmosphere of help and cooperation” (2014, 95). They also observe in Mexico that “Mundists [LLDM members] are economically better off than the general populations of the regions where the congregations are located” (2014, 106). I agree with these positive characterizations based on my observations in southern California, and would add that I met LLDM members from a variety of socio-economic and educational backgrounds who were committed to improving themselves, bettering their communities, and expanding the faith. Members view their bodies as temples of God (see, e.g., *I Corinthians* 3:16), and abstain from alcohol and harmful drugs. The intentional LLDM communities set up around temple buildings may be viewed as one way for members to spread this purifying influence. It becomes a manifestation of the spiritual made physical, one that benefits members and non-members alike.

Along these lines, I was struck by the respect shown by residents to my guides as we walked around the temple block in East LA. In one revealing instance, a man and woman greeted my guides on the way to their car, with the man shaking the hand of one of the LLDM ministers. The interaction was brief but cordial, and I thought little of it, assuming that the resident was an LLDM member. However, after noticing that others at the temple embraced my guides with a handshake, hug, and kiss on the wrist—the LLDM take on the Biblical “holy kiss” (see, e.g., *Romans* 16:16)—I inquired as to why the other man was met with a simple handshake. The resident in question, it turned out, was in fact a former—or “departed”—member of the church, who continues to live in the area. I detected no hostility between LLDM officials and the ex-member and, if I had not pressed the matter with my guide, would have continued to assume that he was a fellow brother, based on the hospitality and courtesy displayed. I was also somewhat surprised to learn that some of the homes near the East LA Temple are occupied by senior church leaders, including bishops. I was informed that Apostle Naasón Joaquín’s wife and mother also live in one of the homes near Arizona Avenue.

Once inside the East LA temple (see figure 6), the visitor is impressed once again by the grandeur of the sanctuary, the division of the pews between male and female members (as also found in Jewish and Muslim traditions), religious iconography on the walls (particularly inspired by the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible), abundant space for an a cappella choir, the prominence of the Apostle’s center stage throne, and, once again, stylized forms of his initials. Despite the obvious pre-eminence of the Apostle in the visual presentation, it is inaccurate to say that LLDM members “worship” Naasón Joaquín. This was emphasized to me at numerous points by guides as well. It seems to me that this is one area where a knowledge of other new religious movements—a comparative religious studies perspective—comes in handy. LLDM, again, is a *restorationist* or *primitivist* Christian church, and thus the reverence displayed by members in church services, prayers, and hymns would be expected in recognition of the Apostle’s role as God’s singular representative on earth. The relationship to the LLDM Apostle, then, is similar to how members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS/Mormons) view their president, who is regarded as a “prophet, seer, and revelator” (LDS Church 2013) in a line of restored messengers tracing back to Joseph Smith (1805–1844) in 19th century America. Among LLDM faithful, Naasón Joaquín is the restored Apostle for the 21st century, in a line that extends back to his father and grandfather in 20th century Mexico.



Figure 6. Interior, East Los Angeles temple, January 2020. Author (middle) with Jack Freeman (left) and Bigvai Estrada (right).

Of course, given the Apostle Naasón Joaquín's detention in Los Angeles at the time of writing this article (Zaveri 2019; Miller 2019), LLDM members are left feeling particularly vulnerable and persecuted. My guides reported verbal and physical harassment against members, both in and out of the Los Angeles area, that rose soon after the Apostle's arrest. However, this is not to say that membership numbers have been negatively affected by the Apostle's imprisonment during this period of crisis. On the contrary, Massimo Introvigne reported increased attendance at the Guadalajara Holy Supper (*Santa Cena*) in 2019 compared to 2018, with some 600,000 flocking to the Beautiful Province (*Hermosa Provincia*) (Introvigne 2018, 2019; for accounts of the Holy Supper, in and out of Mexico, see Puckett 2017, 122–28; Fortuny 2002; and de la Torre 1996, 2000). Jack Freeman, my guide who also serves as a national LLDM spokesperson, recently remarked to the media that the Apostle's arrest has led to increased interest in the church and even the *re-engagement* of lapsed members at the February 2020 Holy Supper held in Pomona, California and attended by tens of thousands over a three-day period (Molina 2020; Wigglesworth 2020).

Members of the church have long faced discrimination in and outside of Mexico, especially, it seems, by Catholics who view the LLDM as a Mexican-born “cult,” in contrast to the influence of American-born “cults” such as the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The theme of marginalization in LLDM culture was punctuated by my reading of the 2018 edition of *The Light of the World Hymnal* (published a before the year before the Apostle’s arrest). A bilingual copy of this hymnal was provided to me by Jack Freeman. I noticed that the hymn “Time of Trials” (“Ya se Acerca el Tiempo”) is included, with these relevant lines: “If you would like to serve our Lord, You must seek for His power above; Persecution will come, there’s no doubt, You and I will certainly rise” (*The Light of the World Hymnal* 2018, 553). In addition, there is a section of restorationist-themed hymns authored by LLDM members, including one entitled “All Glory Be to God” (“La Gloria Sea a Dios”) in reference to Apostle Naasón: “Our hearts are overflowing and give glories to the Lord, For HE made you an Apostle for salvation of our souls” (*The Light of the World Hymnal* 2018, 578).

The central role of the Apostle, and the affection of members toward him, became obvious to me when I attended a “Sunday school” service at the East Los Angeles temple. The service was conducted in Spanish, but I was able to follow along thanks to a translator and use of a bilingual LLDM hymnal. A minister stood at the pulpit, guiding the membership through periods of hymns, prayers, and other messages, including from the Bible. At one point, the minister read from a letter that the church received from the Apostle while incarcerated. The letter had been received near the start of the new year, but the minister used the Sunday school as an opportunity to revisit the epistle. In it, the Apostle encouraged the church to persevere and have faith in the face of persecution and his imprisonment. Naasón Joaquín also relayed a story from prison in which he had a conversation with a fellow inmate, who thereafter recognized his authority as an Apostle of God. The rhetoric was reminiscent of the Pauline “prison epistles” (*Ephesians*, *Philippians*, *Colossians*, and *Philemon*) and the LLDM minister’s exegesis of Naasón Joaquín’s letter likewise functioned to reinforce his esteemed stature and divine authority among the hundreds in attendance. Throughout the service, members were invited to kneel in prayer; and, at numerous points, men and women began to weep as they prayed aloud as they felt moved to do so by the Holy Spirit. I did not take photographs of the parishioners, out of respect as a new

visitor, but the scene in Los Angeles was most impressive and represented a microcosm of LLDM lived religion as the church moves away from its Mexican roots and becomes increasingly cosmopolitan and globalized (Puckett 2017, 112–16).

Conclusion & Open Areas for Research

La Luz del Mundo clearly has a strong (and growing) presence in southern California and beyond. Its temple in East Los Angeles is a central place of worship and church management for the region—all the more important because Apostle Naasón Joaquín remains (as of February 2020) imprisoned in the area. My observations in East Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles, and Long Beach supports the view that LLDM members maintain tight social networks and international communities (see, e.g., Dormady 2007, 2011). These networks reduce free riding and maintain insider/outsider boundaries (Iannaccone 1994), which in the case of the church in southern California has translated into improved social conditions in neighborhoods surrounding places of worship. More quantitative and qualitative data is necessary to situate the positive and causative role of LLDM members in their communities, including much needed scholarly work into the church's human rights campaigns, educational programs, healthcare initiatives, and humanitarian aid (The Light of the World 2019; see Šorytė, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*), not to mention other topics such as missionary work and an impressive public relations infrastructure that makes savvy use of social media sites (Berea International 2020; LLDM Redlands CA 2020).

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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.

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