

Imagining the Third Millennium

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As I walked into the monumental replica of the Temple of Solomon in a slum of São Paulo, Brazil, I was struck by the other-worldly atmosphere of the holy place.

Ushers were dressed in tunics and sashes like Jesus might have worn. In the center of the stage stood a gilded replica of the Ark of the Covenant with two angels keeping guard. Rows of temple candlesticks, menorahs, lined the walls, and copies of the Ten Commandments, Stars of David, and a plethora of other Judaica filled the interior. Forgotten was the downtrodden neighborhood in São Paulo. The congregation was treading the sacred ground of Jerusalem as Jesus had over two millennia ago.



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Humans have never been satisfied with the world as it actually exists. Robins have built the same nests since time immemorial, but humans are never content with the world as it is. From the founding of the first Jewish Kingdom under Kings David and Solomon to the Marxist utopia of the Soviet Union, from Catholic monasteries to the Mormon utopia of Deseret, and from California communes to the Islamic State of ISIS, humans forever seek to fashion a perfect world out of the mud and rock of this world.

As I've argued elsewhere on this blog, religion is the human quest to create a perfect human being inhabiting a perfect world. All else, gods and spirits, heavens and hells, creation stories and future bliss, rituals and theologies, are but commentary on this human quest. Here I focus on four of the most exciting experiments in religious engineering that I studied during my 2019-20 university winter break in Brazil, Mexico and New York.

Envisioning the Third Millennium

As humanity plunges into the Third Millennium, chaos may best describe our condition. Global warming, epidemics, economic rivalries, wars of religion, immorality, crime, homelessness, the spread of nuclear weapons, and a host of other problems cause many to view the new millennium with fear.

Donald Trump endeavors to reassert the United States as the leading global economic, military and political power. China under Xi Jinping is emerging from its "Century of Humiliation" and claiming equality if not superiority with the USA. Vladimir Putin is firmly committed to fashioning a new world order with Russia as the Third Rome. ISIS and other Muslim revolutionaries struggle to impose Islam as the faith of the future. The ruling Hindu Nationalist Party of India (BJP) entertains visions of a dominant and powerful Hindu empire.

The present phenomenal flowering of cults, sects, new religious movements, and prophets are currently producing some of the most visionary, challenging, and possibly successful visions of the future.

Blueprints for the Third Millennium

In Mexico City, I studied the Iglesia del Días Vivo, Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad, La Luz del Mundo (in English: "Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, the Light of the World" -- or simply, La Luz del Mundo [LLDM]), and visited the movement's headquarters in Guadalajara, founded by Aarón Joaquín González in 1977. In São Paulo, I researched Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), founded by Edir Macedo in 1977. In Brasilia, Brazil's capital, I visited the Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus (International Grace of God Church) founded by Romildo Ribeiro Soares in 1980. In the Forest Hills section of Queens, in New York City, I explored the Filipino evangelical movement Iglesia ni Cristo, founded by Felix Y. Manalo in 1914.

Nine Conclusions

The first, most striking aspect of these movements was their militant global outlook. La Luz del Mundo, Igreja Universal and Igreja Internacional all claim global legitimacy and incorporate global terminology into their names. The Igreja Internacional church I visited in Brasilia even has a giant map of the world behind the pulpit to stress its global presence. They are convinced their respective local histories among the lower classes of Mexico and Brazil are of universal consequence and validity. La Luz even announced its intention to construct churches in Alaska in the north, in Chile to the south, across Europe in the east, and in Asia in the west.

Second, these evangelical churches vehemently reject the past thousands of years of religious history, theologies, politics, rituals, and beliefs. They strongly reject as heretical the Trinitarian belief in three equal persons in one god, the use of the cross and crucifix, the veneration of Mary, and the holidays of Christmas, Easter and All Saint's Day. These beliefs place them in vehement opposition to the prevailing Catholic establishment of their respective countries.

Third, La Luz believes that no souls have been saved since 96 A.D., convinces followers that they alone will reach heaven, and that they are the only souls to be saved in almost two millennia. Together with the followers of Jesus, they constitute a select, and growing, group of the saved. Followers are convinced they are the Christian elite, the chosen few, among the many damned. During my travels I was impressed by the fervor of members and their almost aggressive missionary work to bring in new members.



The Igreja Internacional church in Brasilia with a world map behind the pulpit (author's photo).

Fourth, the religious imagination of these and other contemporary religious groups literally runs wild when it comes to architecture and urban planning. Having rejected 2,000 years of Christian history, Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus constructed a replica of Solomon's Temple to recreate the world and religion of Jesus. The millions of people the church claims as members no longer reside in the slums of São Paulo, Rio, Buenos Aires, or even New York or Paris. La Luz exploits every historic and contemporary form of architecture from Mayan temples to Gothic cathedrals to put its physical stamp and even dominate the largely lower class neighborhoods where it is strongest. In Guadalajara, for example, it carved out a grand plaza from the single-family cement block homes and constructed a monumental temple and urban

enclave. All Iglesia ni Cristo churches are painted a brilliant white and aim to dominate their neighborhoods.

Fifth, and related to the skillful use of dramatic architecture, is the successful mastering of the modern media to spread the message. In the hotels and hostels where I stayed during my four-week trip, evangelical television programs saturated the airwaves. Each movement hosts its own distinctive logo, website, newspaper, and dress code. Preaching is dynamic, charismatic, loud, and encourages congregation participation. Each movement stresses the essential role of its clergy in blessing, employing sacred oil (often from the Holy Land), waters and holy cloth, or in interpreting scripture.

Sixth, the movements embrace a degree of apocalyptic visioning. The sanctuaries of La Luz feature elaborate thrones to signify the kingship of Jesus and Iglesia ni Cristo strongly stresses the imminent end of days. Nonetheless, they are deeply committed to constructing a perfect world in the meantime. Their goal is the construction of a perfect world here on earth. La Luz has gained great fame in Mexico for literally obliterating illiteracy, disease, and poverty from among its followers in Guadalajara and elsewhere. The two Igreja churches clearly embrace the Gospel of Prosperity, promising followers material success in this world. Igreja Internacional was advertising a massive youth event for February 2020 focused on saving the seas and rivers of the world. Iglesia ni Cristo supports land reform, resettlement, dental and health clinics, and poverty eradication programs.

Seventh, all the movements are heavily politically engaged. Reflecting their deep roots in Judaism, they reject what they see as the heretical teaching of the separation of church and state. Brazil and Mexico currently have evangelical presidents. Bishop Marcelo Bezerra Crivella, the son of the founder of Igreja Internacional, was elected mayor of Rio in 2017. Iglesia ni Cristo practices block voting for select candidates and July 27 was declared a national "Iglesia ni Cristo Day" in 2009. The new president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, recently introduced legislation to make morality teaching a part of the national educational curriculum.

Eighth, the evangelical movements constitute an ever-changing, morphing, flowering, and declining constellation of churches. Unlike the 2,000 year-old Catholic and Orthodox churches, and the well-established Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Mormon, and other denominations, evangelical movements are in constant flux. The charisma that fuels the emergence of so many evangelical churches, is not hereditary. La Luz, for example, has managed to survive the death of its founder, but not without schisms while other movements have declined with the passing (or imprisonment) of their founder. However, the constant rise and decline of evangelical movements allows them to respond with unique and even revolutionary solutions to emerging Third Millennium challenges unencumbered with age-old theologies, traditions and rituals.

Finally, the Latin American evangelical churches are strongly focused on the State of Israel. This fascination with Israel and Jews is not apocalyptic as it is with their North American counterparts. For North American evangelicals, the apocalyptic expectation is linked to the perceived moral decline of the USA. Latin Americans, on the other hand, celebrate the emergence of Brazil, Mexico, and other nations as major powers. The return to the pure Christianity of Jesus encourages an interest in the Holy Land, the State of Israel, Jerusalem, Jews, and Jewish symbols.

The Future

This essay attempts to chart the emergence of a unique Latin American expression of Christianity as a major actor in what Samuel Huntington described as the "clash of civilizations." The long-established Roman Catholic, and later Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Mormon, Baptist, and other denominational hierarchies that dominated Latin America since the Spanish conquest in the early 16th century are rapidly coming to an end.

My Latin American travels introduced me not only to the evangelical movements analyzed above but to a host of others in Puerto Rico, Peru, Argentina, Venezuela, and Bolivia. As humanity moves into the Third Millennium, the vitality, creativity and diversity of these movements are confronting the challenges of the age -- globalization, climate change, urbanization, industrialization, epidemics, sexuality, genetics, and a host of other problems -- in new and unique ways. Western Christians would do well to take a serious look at what is happening in the slums, *barrios* and *favelas* of Latin America.

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Photo at top: *La Luz del Mundo's flagship church in Guadalajara, Mexico*