



# Beards, Tattoos, and Cool Kids: Lived Religion and Postdenominational Congregations in Northwestern Mexico

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the everyday experiences of 20 individuals from two prominent *postdenominational* congregations in northwestern Mexico that branched off from Pentecostal and Evangelical *transnational* churches. Using the life-story method and the *lived religion* approach will allow for the understanding of how *postdenominationalism* emerged in the region and why these congregations have been undergoing a series of deinstitutionalizing innovations that ring closer to the expectations that *millennials* have regarding the emotional, the intellectual, the social, and the cultural aspects of their lives. This phenomenon not only echoes with the idea of the *deconstructed church* that Marti and Ganiel described among *millennials* in the US (Marti and Ganiel 2014), it also imposes a challenge for Latin American religious studies, whose trend has been to ignore the *postdenominational* category, favoring the continued use of *Pentecostal* and/or *Neopentecostal/charismatic* to refer to these congregations, which makes it difficult to understand the changes, the innovation, and the deconstructive processes that *postdenominational* churches have been undergoing in the last three decades.

**Keywords** Postdenominationalism · Millennials · Christianity · Lived religion · Emerging church movement

## Introduction

Although Mexico was founded as a Catholic country and still retains its Catholic majority, the power of Rome dwindles: the last three population censuses conducted by Mexico's *National Institute of Statistics and Geography* (INEGI) showed a

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significant decrease in the number of Mexicans who profess this religion: While back in 1895, 99.1% of Mexico's population was Catholic, the percentage went down to 89.9 in 1990; by 2010, only 82.7% of its population identified as Roman-Catholics. The most recent census drove that number down to 77.7%, while Protestant and Evangelical adscription went up from 7.5% in 2010 to 9.8 in 2020 (INEGI 2020). According to the *Mexican Survey on Religious Beliefs and Practices*, this religious shift is more pronounced in the border states of the country (De la Torre et al. 2020; RIFREM 2016). The changes that have occurred in the religious landscape of Mexico during the post-revolutionary period can be explained by the migration of the rural and indigenous workforce into the big cities; Evangelical and Pentecostal churches took this opportunity to increase their numbers among the most vulnerable because they were more effective in providing moral, spiritual economic support (Garma and Hernandez 2007; Hernández 2013; Hunt 2002; Parker 1996; Wilson 1959). As migration patterns to northern Mexico and the US increased, Protestant and Evangelical congregations reinforced their presence in the country, leading to the creation of *support networks* and *transnational* and *translocal* communities (Ibarra 2019; Levitt 2007; Odgers and Ruiz 2009; Ramirez 2015). The proximity and interaction that these communities have had with the US, and particularly with the progressivism associated with *Californian culture*, has led not only just to a more liberal way in which the gospel is interpreted, adapted, and transmitted, but also to the increase of middle and upper class *millennials* within the Evangelical and Pentecostal landscape (Gomes 2020; Ibarra 2019; Marti 2009; Marti and Ganiel 2014)

This paper analyzes the everyday experiences of 20 individuals from two prominent *postdenominational* congregations in northwestern Mexico that branched off from Pentecostal and Evangelical *transnational* churches. Using the life-story method and the *lived religion* approach will allow for the understanding of how *postdenominationalism* emerged in the region and why these congregations have been undergoing a series of deinstitutionalizing innovations that ring closer to the expectations that *millennials* have regarding the emotional, the intellectual, the social and the cultural aspects of their lives. This phenomenon not only echoes with the idea of the *deconstructed church* that Marti and Ganiel described among *millennials* in the US (Marti and Ganiel 2014), it also imposes a challenge for Latin American religious studies, whose trend has been to ignore the *postdenominational* category, favoring the continued use of *Pentecostal* and/or *Neopentecostal/charismatic* to refer to these congregations, which makes it difficult to understand the changes, the innovation and the deconstructive processes that *postdenominational* churches have been undergoing in the last three decades.

Religious communities are more than the rules and tenets that its members are expected to uphold; they are constituted by *people* with agency and, in a way, people are *the* institution itself; this is another instance in which the *lived religion* approach proves useful: rather than focusing on macroscopic phenomena, this framework aims to understand how individuals *live* their religious preferences in their everyday lives: what do they do?, what won't they do?; how do they dress?; what do they eat?; how do they have fun?: how does the spiritual materializes itself for the believer?; and so forth. In short, *lived religion* is "the embodied and enacted forms of spirituality that occur in everyday life" (Ammerman 2014:189). Using this framework, the act of observing, inquiring and listening becomes attuned to the nuances that contribute to the changes

that occur within religious systems. Other key elements that this paper addresses have to do with the following questions: why have *postdenominational* congregations emerged in northwestern Mexico and how do they differentiate themselves from other *denominational* and *non-denominational* churches within the Protestant and Evangelical spectrum? What are the long-term implications for this kind of religiosity in the region, considering the high rate at which religious adherence is changing in Mexico? The ethnographic data acquired to answer these questions was acquired during a 3-year period of extensive fieldwork in the states of California, Nevada, Arizona and Texas, in the US, and in the states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, and Nuevo Leon in Mexico, using direct observation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews.

## The Emergence of Postdenominationalism in Northwestern Mexico

Within Christianity, non-denominational churches tend to congregate in loose associations and usually practice a form of Evangelicalism or Pentecostalism. Although these churches usually believe that they are the *authentic* continuation of the Christian community established by Jesus Christ, they see ecumenism in a more favorable way than other denominational churches, which allows them to establish collaborative alliances with other congregations (Anderson 2004). Postdenominationalism is difficult to define, but it usually refers to the idea that no Christian denomination or church holds the absolute truth when it comes to interpreting the Gospel. Rather than being confrontational due to the differences that arise from such a task, *postdenominational* congregations recognize that each and every church has a piece of the *true message* (Deverell 2005). In practice, *postdenominational* churches are usually composed by *seekers* who attend or used to attend other Pentecostal, Evangelical, Neopentecostal, and/or non-denominational churches, and were not satisfied with their dynamics and their salvation offer (De la Torre 2012; Parker 1996; Warburg 2001).

Mexico has been a secular country since 1857, but its anticlerical policies were perceived as harsh and severe with the advent of the 1917 constitution. Tensions between church and state reached an all-time high during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period: the *Cristero War* of 1926–1929 still resonates in the *bajío*<sup>1</sup> states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, Zacatecas and Aguascalientes in central Mexico (González 2001), but even so, the *Ley de Asociaciones Religiosas y Culto Público*<sup>2</sup> of 1992 escalated things down by rolling back some anticlerical restrictions, such as those that prohibited preaching in public areas. This law also established the *Oficina de Asuntos Religiosos*<sup>3</sup>, a government branch that allows for the registration of religious associations in the country. Up until 2020, over 7000 congregations had officially registered, and about half of them were of Roman-Catholic nature (De la Torre et al. 2020). In a way, the *Ley de Asociaciones Religiosas y Culto Público* was a turning point: the last two censuses have shown that in spite of Mexico's Catholic-heavy heritage, religious diversity has been a key element of the cultural plurality that the country has to offer. In 10 years, not only did Protestant and Evangelical adherence go up, the 2020 census also

<sup>1</sup> Lowlands.

<sup>2</sup> Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship.

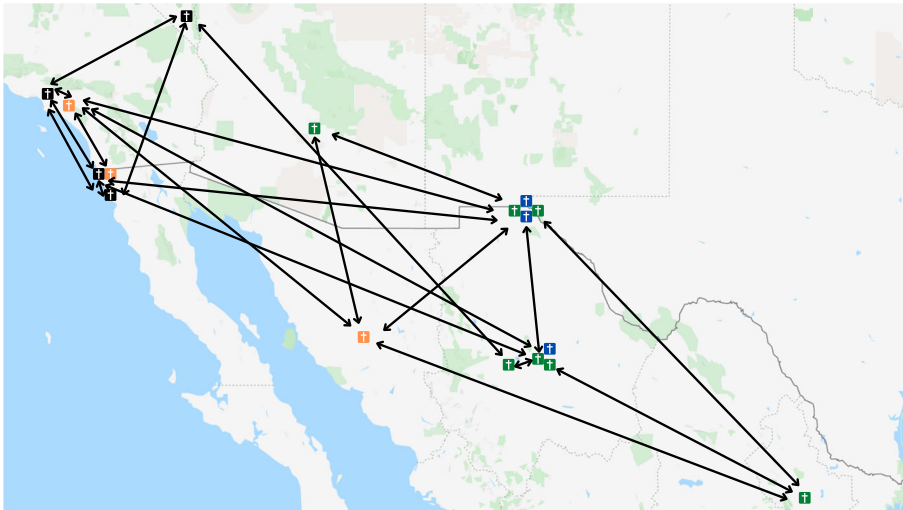
<sup>3</sup> Office of Religious Affairs.

indicates that 10.6% of the population claimed to be *without religion*, an increase of 5.9% from the 2010 census. While the usefulness of this category is yet to be debated given how ambiguous it is and how the COVID-19 lockdowns might have interfered with data recollection, it does show the complexity of the Mexican religious landscape compared to the one existing 30 years ago. The ethnographic data in this paper will show that *postdenominational* christians were registered both into the *Protestant and Evangelical* and the *without a religion* category, mainly because *postdenominationalism* has not been recognized in Mexico and because of the anti-institutional nature and the *religion à la carte* phenomenon that has begun to show up among believers across Christianity (Hervieu-Léger 2005); this is another reason as to why a *lived religion* approach helps with the understanding of these *dissident* religiosities that are either left out or grouped with Pentecostal or Neopentecostal/Charismatic congregations when a quantitative approach is used.

Protestantism is not monolithic; soon after its arrival in Mexico, different branches and spinoffs began to appear in the religious landscape of the country. After several revivals over the course of two centuries (Bastian 2013; Cox 2009; Creech 1996; Dow 2005; Ramirez 2015; Robeck 2017), Evangelical and Pentecostal churches established a foothold among the poor, the rural and the indigenous population because of their ability to provide support, integration and a sense of belonging (Garrard-Burnett and Stoll 1993); adding the migration factor to this equation brought about *translocal* communities, such as those existing among evangelicals and Pentecostals in the US-Mexico border, particularly in the states of California and Baja California (Hernández and O'Connor 2013). These *translocal* communities have been providing social, economic, and spiritual assistance to the waves of migrants moving in from Mexico and Central America into the west coast of the US, mainly California and Oregon (Odgers and Ruiz 2009; Ramirez 2003; Stephen 2007). Those migrants that make it back to their original communities, be it voluntarily or involuntarily, usually convert their friends and relatives into Evangelicalism and/or Pentecostalism, thus explaining why both borders in Mexico show the highest rate of religious shift towards the Evangelical-Pentecostal spectrum (De la Torre et al. 2020). Drug trafficking and abuse has also contributed to the spread of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the border region, because most rehabilitation centers in northwestern Mexico are owned and operated by them (Odgers and Olivas 2018).

The conjunction of *transfronterizo*<sup>4</sup> culture, *translocality*, and Pentecostal-Evangelical dominance has made way for a *Transnational Evangelical Support Network* (TESN) in northwestern Mexico. After a series of ethnographical visits, interviews and several instances of direct and participant observation between 2016 and 2019, it was possible to trace the existence of this non-official collaborative network (Fig. 1). The TESN is conformed by the interaction of Pentecostal, Evangelical, Neopentecostal, non-denominational and, recently, *postdenominational* churches, via their congregants, pastors, leaders, musicians, and creative teams, even when there is not an official or explicit collaborative association between each institution. Cases of official joint ventures

<sup>4</sup> *Transfronterizo* (*transborder*) people are individuals that consistently cross the USA-Mexico border either because of work, to do shopping or just for recreational purposes. They can either have tourist visas or dual citizenship. Given the frequency of their interactions across the border, they represent a cultural-hybrid that combines social, cultural, and historical aspects of both countries: a *transfronterizo culture* (Alegría 2015).



**Fig. 1** Map depicting the *Transnational Evangelical Support Network*; Pentecostal megachurches are depicted in orange; evangelical megachurches in green; Neopentecostal megachurches in blue, and postdenominational megachurches in black. The arrows depict instances of collaboration among people who attend and lead these congregations (Source: Ibarra 2019)

between one or more congregations have resulted in the hosting of massive worship sessions, musical concerts, social gatherings, religious conferences and Christian festivals, which have made it easier for Pentecostal and Evangelical churches to cater to non-migrant, middle, and upper-middle class sectors in the region, taking advantage of the modernization that bigger congregations have undergone in regard to worship and mediatic prowess, but also thanks to the *flirting* that some Evangelical and non-denominational churches have had with secular entertainment, similar to what *Hillsong* has been doing in several parts of the world, including Mexico as of 2019 (Ibarra 2019).

If Televangelism contributed to the spread of Pentecostalism and Neopentecostalism in the US during the 1960s and 1970s (Bowler 2018; Riss 1988), social media and the TESN have instilled a sense of ecumenism and non-denominationality among adults and young-adults in northwestern Mexico, even when they belong to denominational Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, such as those under the jurisdiction of the *Assemblies of God* (Ibarra 2019). While it is true that most Evangelical and Pentecostal groups are hermetic and exclusivist by nature (Garrard-Burnett and Stoll 1993), *non-denominational ecumenism* has been present throughout middle and upper-middle class American Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Their openness toward other denominations and non-Christians echoes with the interview that Billy Graham gave in 1997:

“I think that everybody that loves Christ, whether they are conscious of it or not, they are members of the body of Christ...[God] is calling people out of the world for his name, whether they come from the Muslim world, or the Buddhist world or the non-believing world, they are members of the Body of Christ because they have been called by God. They may not know the name of Jesus, but they know in their hearts that they need something they do not have, and they turn to the

only light they have, and I think that they are saved, and they are going to be with us in heaven” (Murray 2000:73)

The fact that such an influential figure for Evangelicalism spoke from that position went on to show that something was changing, not just with the worldview of some religious leaders at the turn of the century; what Graham said was also a reflection of the changes that were about to happen in how religious services were conducted. One of the most important changes that took place during the 1990s had to do with modernizing worship services. During the early 1990s, electric guitar-led songs became more and more accepted in the repertoire of many evangelical churches, and this led to the creation of the *contemporary worship music* genre (Reagan 2015). Music signaled the beginning of a series of changes that would set the stage not just for the *postdenominational* churches analyzed in this paper, but also for the innovations in worship brought on by the Australian-based *Hillsong Movement*:

“The style of Christianity dominated by eighteenth-century hymns, a routinized liturgy, and bureaucratized layers of social organization is gradually dying. In its place are emerging hundreds of new-paradigm churches, which are appropriating stylistic and organizational elements from our postmodern culture. This reformation, unlike the one led by Martin Luther, is challenging not doctrine but the medium through which the message of Christianity is articulated. Appropriating contemporary cultural forms, these postdenominational churches are creating a new genre of worship music; they are restructuring the organization of institutional Christianity; and they are democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of priesthood of all believers” (Miller 1998: 196)

Miller had foreshadowed a series of changes regarding the structural composition of Christianity and the ways in which newer generations would go about shaping their faith, although he was careful not to consider any doctrinal or theological changes. Southern California (SoCal) and its multi-diverse composition would challenge that in the following years. Just as the Evangelical and Pentecostal revivals were happening in the US during the 1960s and 1970s, California served as the backdrop for three movements that would go on to influence the emergence of *postdenominational* churches in the region during the 21st century: the *Jesus Movement*, the *Vineyard Christian Fellowship*, and *Calvary Chapel*. While conservative in nature, these churches explicitly appealed to Californian youngsters, particularly to those who sympathized or had sympathized with the liberal aspects of Californian society (Shibley 1996). With the ever increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of SoCal due to migration, it was only a matter of time for the emergence of multicultural and multi-ethnic churches. Given their stance in favor of diversity, these churches were also some of the first to *bend the rules* to promote inclusivity, even though these actions generated an increased amount of controversy for them, particularly among the more traditional congregations in the region.

*Transfronterizo* culture, although present throughout the USA-Mexico border, is particularly strong in northwestern Mexico and southwestern America due to the Tijuana-San Diego border, which is the busiest land border in the world (Ganster and

Collins 2017). This is important when understanding why *postdenominational* churches appeared in northwestern Mexico first. American *postdenominational* churches first emerged in California and they were offshoots of Baptist and Evangelical churches: MOSAIC, located in Hollywood California is, perhaps, the most prominent congregation of the *Emerging Church Movement*. According to Marti and Ganiel, congregations belonging to the *Emerging Church Movement* are known for being anti-institutional and transgress theological and traditionalist barriers; they favor younger leadership and younger pastors; they place high value on experimentation and creativity and the aim to create neutral religious grounds akin to the safe spaces sought out by *millennials* (Marti and Ganiel 2014). It is within these environments that religious innovations can develop, making it possible to conceive a *deconstructed church*.

MOSAIC was founded in 1943 as part of the Southern Baptist Church. Straying away from its Baptist roots, it began a transition towards non-denominationalism in the 1990s, exploiting its *postdenominational* potential in the 2010s thanks not just to its mastery of social media and pop culture, but also for its awareness and sensitivity toward social issues, as well as its strong stance against any kind of discrimination (Marti and Ganiel 2014; Ibarra 2019). *Central Church* in Henderson, Nevada, is another *postdenominational* congregation that was originally founded in 1962 with Evangelical roots. It also began a transition towards non-denominationalism in the 1990s and to *postdenominationalism* in the 2010s. These two churches are of particular interest to *postdenominational* churches in northwestern México, since they directly influenced the shift towards the *Emerging Church Movement*, particularly in Tijuana, just across the border with San Diego, California, and Ensenada, a city 64 miles south of Tijuana.

Similar to what happened in the USA, *postdenominational* churches in México sprung from other denominational and non-denominational churches: Ancla, which is Tijuana's first *postdenominational* church, was founded in the 2010s by a group of young adults in their 30s and 40s; its lead pastor was trained by Vino Nuevo's leadership school in El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. Vino Nuevo is one of the biggest non-denominational churches in northern Mexico and even though it is not part of the *Emerging Church Movement*, it continues to set the example regarding worship innovation and pop culture usage, with its rebranded image: Comunidad Olivo (Ibarra 2019). Horizonte is Ensenada's *postdenominational* church, it was originally established to be a branch of Calvary Chapel, as an Evangelical congregation, but it rebranded itself when its current lead pastor took hold of it in the 2010s. Horizonte is influential in the region because of its leadership school, which teaches *postdenominational* principles among a variety of future leaders and pastors across the Evangelical and Pentecostal spectrum, focusing on inclusiveness and non-discrimination among its core tenets. During the last 3 years, MOSAIC, Ancla, and Horizonte expanded their influence to other parts of Mexico: MOSAIC opened a campus in Mexico City; Ancla expanded to San Diego and Rosarito; and Horizonte took a foothold in northeastern Mexico, in the city of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon (Ibarra 2019). *Postdenominationalism* and the *Emerging Church Movement* sprung in SoCal not just because its context allowed for the intersection of Christianity and Pop Culture, but also because California's liberal background regarding social issues and its multi-ethnic and migratory nature allowed for diversity and inclusiveness to seep into the worldview of its *millennial* population, which in turn, set the stage for a *deconstructed*

*church* whose innovations and adaptations are bringing about a Christian revival among newer generations (Marti 2009). Due to its proximity and its *transfronterizo culture*, Northwestern Mexico became the natural next-step in the expansion of a deconstructed church, in spite of Mexico's conservativeness when it comes to religion and society.

## Lived Religion and Religious Deconstruction

Religion cannot be reduced to institutional rules and theological treatises; religion is also a *chain of memory* that links rituals, traditions, and practices with individuals; these elements have also been socially validated due to their relevance for a particular group of people (Hervieu-Léger 2005). Secularization theories predicted the decline of religion only to be challenged by empirical data showing that the world had not become less religious; instead, religion became pluralized and diversified, ushering new ways in which individuals could experience the sacred (Berger 2014). The religious shift that has been happening in Mexico since 1992 can be further analyzed by looking at the relationship between the dominant traditions within each religious movement and the particular ways in which people attune their beliefs to such traditions and their everyday lives. When individuals are incapable of maintaining a link between their actions, their worldview and the rules and precepts of their religious group, they will engage an adaptive process that will allow them to attain a proper level of cognitive harmony between what they believe and what they should believe. Although traditional power structures still hold sway over much of modern society, not everything is under their control. For De Certeau, everyday life is a breeding area where many of these mechanisms of resistance are conceived (De Certeau 1997); if a macroscopic lens were to be used, these adaptive processes would not be picked up; hence, the importance of choosing a microsocial approach to analyze how and why religion is changing.

*Lived religion* should not be confused with the concept of *popular religion/folk religion*, since its intention is to focus in the collective and syncretic ways in which a collective generates spinoffs based or partially based on an *official religion*. Mexico has an extensive body of work pertaining these categories, especially when it comes to Catholicism (Báez-Jorge 2011; Gímenez 1978; Gudrún 2014; Redfield 1936; Vanderwood 2004). Using a *lived religion* framework allows for the understanding of how individuals *live* and embody their religious beliefs in their everyday activities; this is way this approach by focuses on practices instead of beliefs, particularly those performed outside religious institutions; it also emphasizes individual agency rather than collectivities or traditions (Ammerman 2014; Hall 1997). Currently, there is not a unified line of thought when it comes to *lived religion*: by 2016, a third of the English-produced publications using *lived religion* took the term for granted, and most of the research that has been produced using this framework in English has had different ways of implementing it, mostly focusing in the distinction between the *institutional* and the everyday life aspect of their subjects (Ammerman 2016). Some researchers have associated *lived religion* with the everyday practices of sacralization (Edgell 2012; Orsi 1985), others have decided to focus on the people that have been left in the margins of a religious congregation (Neitz 2011) or on migrant transnational communities (Steigenga et al. 2008). Another way of implementing this framework has been to



focus on the overall practices in the everyday life of a certain group of individuals (McGuire 2008), or to bring attention to the cultural ideas and practices present in secular elite discourse in the religious sphere (Bender et al. 2013). In an attempt to find a unified definition of what *lived religion* studies, Ammerman proposes a series of domains that have been used by other researchers and that could encompass what future *lived religion* research projects could focus on: *embodiment*, *discourse*, and *materiality* (Ammerman 2016).

The *postdenominational* churches attended by the individuals mentioned in this paper favor the elements that Marti and Ganiel described when analyzing *postdenominational* congregations in California (Marti and Ganiel 2014): they are *anti-institutional*, since they refuse to be called *churches*, preferring the term *communities*, they also reject traditional hierarchical structures, preferring to organize themselves in a more horizontal disposition; they transgress theological and traditionalist barriers, as we will see in the next section; they also favor younger headship and younger pastors when compared to other Evangelical and Pentecostal churches; they place high value on experimentation and creativity, with the aim of creating safe and harmonic spaces, attuned to the cultural and social expectations that *millennials* have, making them ideal spaces for sexual and ethnic minorities that could have been intimidated by more traditional and conservative congregations (Marti and Ganiel 2014). It must be mentioned that these deconstructive processes do not occur at the collective level: when visiting these congregations, pastors and leaders will never advocate for radical *deconstructive* actions; they will never promote alcohol consumption, drug experimentation, abortions, feminism or LGBTQ issues, so how come the interviewees, whose cases will be presented in the next section, mention some of these key topics when explaining why they decided to stay at these *postdenominational* churches? As previously stated, in order for a *deconstructed church* to exist, the collective approach to the sacred has to be done in a manner that allows for the transgression of traditional theological barriers: MOSAIC, Central Church, Ancla and Horizonte, and even other non-denominational churches in the TESN push for the existence of *fundamental* and *secondary* beliefs, and also for the existence of *faith maturity* and *tripping stones*. In essence, *fundamental beliefs* refer to the basic Christian premise of Jesus dying in the cross to save humanity; *secondary beliefs* are the ways in which the *fundamental beliefs* have been culturally and socially adapted over the course of the centuries. *Faith maturity* is a concept thrown around not just in the *postdenominational churches* that were visited, but also in some non-denominational and Evangelical churches as well, it refers to the perception that a Christian individual has when it comes to how knowledgeable he/she is and how close he/she feels to God's grace: the more knowledge you have, the more you can be assured that you are not sinning when engaging in *secular* or non-religious activities; *postdenominational* churches belonging to the *Emergent Church Movement* that Marti and Ganiel proposed motivate their members to not be afraid of the *world* and to retake it, since it is a divine creation. *Mature* members should be wary not to become a *tripping stone* for other individuals who might be struggling with an element of the *secular/non-religious* realm, such as alcohol or drugs, which serves as an explanation as to why these *dissidences* happen at the individual level (Ibarra 2019).

Taking all of this into account, the interviews that were conducted tried to focus on the three domains that Ammerman described for the analysis of *lived religion: embodiment, discourse, and materiality*. These domains allow for the identification of actual behaviors and practices that are rooted in the *Emerging Church Movement* variation present in the *postdenominational* churches that were visited. The *embodiment* domain refers to “how bodies enter into religious experience [...] gardening, healing, dancing, mixed martial arts [...] aging [...] how bodies enter into and express connections with spirituality [...] bodily sensation of touch, smell, movement [...] and gender (Ammerman 2016: 11). The *discourse* domain pertains to “talk [...] from hop lyrics to internet interactions to stories about fatherhood [...] and to the ways people put their connection to everyday transcendence into words” (Ammerman 2016: 12). The *materiality* domain relates to the fact that “spiritual experience can be embedded in everything from clothing and jewelry to mementos on a desk and a favorite chair by a window [...] places and things [...] ways that people literally touch transcendence” (Ammerman 2016:14). The title of this paper refers to the way in which these three domains manifested themselves in the *Emerging Church Movement* congregations that were visited, marked by a persistent *hipster/cool kid* culture as it was understood at the time that the fieldwork phase was conducted: bearded men, tattooed people, skinny jeans, flannel and denim shirts, graphic tees, v-necks, thick-framed glasses, bow ties, scarves, fedoras, cardigans, oversized sweaters, vintage skirts, and jumpsuits, among others (Bendinger 2019; Chang 2017).

### **Beards, Tattoos, and Cool Kids: Bending the Rules and Getting Away with it**

The intersection of Christianity and Pop Culture is not new; even before Hillsong revolutionized worship services in the 1980s, the struggle between a Christian lifestyle and an active consumption of popular culture has been present for generations (Breen 2008). Although *converse wearing-tattooed Christians* have started to become a staple of *postdenominational* churches and some middle- and upper-middle class Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations throughout the world (Gomes 2020; Rocha 2017), the deconstructive processes motivated by the *Emerging Church Movement* go beyond stylistic and fashionable looks. As previously stated, the information contained in this section was obtained through a series of in-depth interviews and several phases of direct and participant observation in four postdenominational churches: MOSAIC in Los Angeles, California; Central Church in Henderson, Nevada; Ancla in Tijuana, Baja California and Horizonte, in Ensenada, Baja California. These interviews were conducted between March and October 2018 and were an integral part of a doctoral research project. Given the nature of this paper, the purpose of these excerpts will be to highlight the *lived religion* domains that each collaborator expressed in his/her narrative, since it serves as proof of the deconstructive nature of the *Emerging Church Movement* and the effect that it has on its members. For ethical purposes, the interviewees will be referred to in a serialized and anonymous manner. The following table summarizes important elements that must be considered for each collaborator (Table 1):

**Table 1** List of *postdenominational* individuals that were interviewed between March and October 2018 (Source: in-depth interviews)

Subject	Gender	Age	Education/training	Current occupation	Previous congregation
PD1	Male	29	College/audio engineering	Part of the creative team at his congregation/freelance content creator.	Evangelical
PD2	Male	27	College/graphic design	Lead designer at private studio/freelance designer.	Evangelical
PD3	Female	32	College/graphic design	Freelance photographer.	Evangelical
PD4	Male	22	College/graphic design	Freelance graphic designer.	Pentecostal
PD5	Male	23	College/music	Coffee shop barista.	Evangelical
PD6	Male	33	College/visual arts	Designer at private studio	Pentecostal
PD7	Female	29	College/visual arts	Freelance visual artist.	Evangelical
PD8	Male	25	High school	Unemployed/future Pentecostal pastor	Pentecostal
PD9	Male	34	College/communication	Pastor	Evangelical
PD10	Male	30	College/marketing	Content creator at a local magazine.	Pentecostal
PD11	Male	22	College/communication	Customer service representative	Pentecostal
PD12	Male	37	College/communication	Pastor	Pentecostal
PD13	Male	29	High school	Pastor	Evangelical
PD14	Male	34	High school	Leadership school director	Baptist
PD15	Male	23	College/IT	Programmer	Baptist
PD16	Male	26	College/film School	Freelance cinematographer.	Baptist
PD17	Female	25	College/photography	Freelance photographer	Baptist
PD18	Male	36	High school	Pastor	Evangelical
PD19	Male	30	College/marketing	Leads a NGO to prevent suicide	Methodist
PD20	Male	29	High school	Coffee shop barista	Pentecostal

The first interview was held in Tijuana, Baja California. PD1<sup>5</sup> is in his late 20s and his role is to be one of the creative leaders of Ancla. For descriptive purposes, Ancla looks and feels more akin to an artistic community led by hipster *cool kids*. Located in downtown Tijuana, Ancla's minimalistic outdoors and logo makes it difficult for pedestrians to identify it as a church. Once you step in, hostesses will welcome you as a VIP if it is your first time visiting, they will also deliver a welcoming package, consisting of stickers, a coupon for a free coffee in their cafeteria and a CD with their latest musical hits. The overall feel before entering the auditory is that of being in a lounge filled with local artists, while the speakers play *chill/lo-fi hip-hop*, next to the main door, there is a merchandise booth:

“We tried to design Ancla as a community that can be enjoyed by our generation, but also for people who want to praise God without getting bored by traditional services [...] every church with our same vibe has something in common: they

<sup>5</sup> PD stands for postdenominational, the number refers to the order in which these interviews were conducted.

were established by *gabachos*<sup>6</sup> who were smart enough to understand that the importance that the cultural context has for people [...] the more you get to read the Bible, the more you get to understand God's grace and, with it, you get to enjoy more freedom to do things that will make other Christians shun you down; I'm not saying that other churches are wrong for being restrictive, but I do believe that being less knowledgeable makes you feel insecure as to what things you can do and what things you cannot do when you are a Christian [...] I come from an evangelical upbringing and I was lucky enough not to have an over-restrictive family, but even so, I was not allowed to pursue a musical career or to enjoy simple pleasures such as a bottle of beer or secular music, so I left my church; it was not something dramatic since I had the perfect excuse to do so: college. I eventually started my own rock band and we were part of Mexico's City local scene for a while [...] at some point I began to feel empty and realized that I wanted to be able to express my faith without having to go back to a restrictive lifestyle. I started visiting Vino Nuevo in Chihuahua and there I met PD9. That church introduced us to Hillsong-style worship music and we loved it, but even then it was a little bit restrictive for my tastes, later on we all moved to Tijuana for work purposes and we decided to start a community for people like us. PD9 had read a lot of postmodern religious authors and had visited postmodern churches in California, so we had a rough blueprint for what we wanted to do [...] I believe that there are *fundamental beliefs and secondary beliefs* when it comes to Christianity; our *fundamental beliefs* are shared across every single denomination: the fact that Christ died for our sins and saved us by his grace. *Secondary beliefs* change with the times and with the cultural context of each community; once you get to grasp this, you can attain a certain level of *maturity in your faith* [...] I am not the praying-type of person, but I do have a constant dialogue with God, and He lets me know that drinking a couple of beers or even smoking marijuana is not going to make me any less Christian. Having said this, I try to be aware of my surroundings, one must never put himself in a position in which you can be a *tripping stone* for other members of our community who might be struggling with alcoholism or any kind of addiction". (PD1 2018)

Even though it is only an excerpt, this first interview with a member of a *postdenominational* congregation belonging to the *Emerging Church Movement* (PECM) in Mexico hinted at how the deconstruction process occurs in its members, and how their lived religion is linked with the reappropriation of spaces and activities that are usually considered profane by other denominations, while being open to diversity and following a strict anti-discrimination rule:

"We must know how to interpret the Bible within our context, that and Jesus' grace are the most important things that we as Christians have [...] people cannot keep using Leviticus to discriminate against others if they do not understand the historical and cultural context in which it was written [...] I come from an evangelical household but when I went away to college I strayed away from

<sup>6</sup> Gabacho is slang for American.

my original congregation; it was an opportunity to reassess my faith and what I wanted out of it [...] getting to work for Ancla as a visual artist was an important step for me in consolidating my faith [...] I have a personal relationship with God and I know that all of his creation is for us to enjoy, so I try to bring God's presence into every place and activity that I have to do as part of my daily routine, be it at work or during my free time [...] I usually hang out with my non-christian friends even when they visit places that would have been forbidden under my original congregation, such as bars and clubs, and I know that it will not make me any less worthy of Christ's love" (PD2 2018)

Despite not being an exclusive feature of *postdenominational* churches, considering that there are numerous examples of Pentecostal and Evangelical female headships (Maddox 2013), PECM congregations tend to have a more diversified staff, particularly in leadership positions, such as PD3, who is a single mother and a photographer for Ancla:

"I come from an evangelical background, when I became pregnant as a result of a premarital relationship, a lot of the members of my original community talked behind my back, I could feel their hypocrisy and their constant judgement [...] I never lost my faith but I did lose hope in organized religion [...] I was lucky when PD2 told me about this new church that he was part of, he promised to me that I would never be judged, and that is how I ended up liking it here [...] I never imagined that I would be an important and valued part of a congregation [...] I love being a Christian but I never use any kind of religious imagery and I try to be respectful of other people's beliefs [...] one of the things that I love the most about Ancla is that I know that they will never judge me for what I decide to wear and for what I decide to do for recreational purposes [...] I am a feminist and with my free time I try to help other girls who suffered any kind of abuse, especially within religious organizations [...] I believe that part of my duties on this earth are to spread the love of Christ through my actions, without needing for them to be labeled, people will be able to recognize love and kindness regardless of where it is coming from, so I don't follow any specific rituals other than silently praying to myself and teaching my daughter that God's teachings can be resumed in loving each other as much as possible". (PD3 2018)

Not every member of Ancla feels as mature in its faith as the previous three cases; PD4 is a 22-year-old with a Pentecostal background who joined after having a bad break up with his previous congregation:

"I decided to give Ancla a try after working for PD2 [...] since I come from a pentecostal family I know a lot of what the Bible says and I feel attracted to how people in Ancla interpret God's message of love, but I don't feel ready yet to experience the freedom that Christ gave us [...] the fact that I'm not judged for not daring to experience the secular world in such a liberal manner is what keeps me here [...] I fled from my previous congregation because it came to a point in

which I was genuinely uncomfortable with how the religious services unfolded there: people getting possessed, talking in tongues and being really pushy [...] I love Ancla because it promotes a very private and low-key religious experience that allows us, the believers, to blend in way more easily with the outside world”. (PD4 2018)

Ancla’s founder and lead pastor is a man in his mid-30s, even though he trained in an evangelical leadership school belonging to Vino Nuevo, he wanted to innovate and create a congregation for those who were commonly misunderstood and set aside by more conventional churches:

“The idea was to abolish established paradigms, to challenge the existing stereotypes of what it implies to be a Christian and a church [...] we are not doing this with the purpose of attracting young people, we are the young people and this is how we dress and how we act, so it’s natural for people like us to feel intrigued by Ancla, we are not pretending [...] it is hard and we will always remain polemic for as long as we exist, but we are not doing it to create controversy just for the hell of it [...] other christians tend to accuse us of being just smoke and mirrors, of not taking seriously enough the message of God, but that we are changing the way in which God’s most important message is being delivered, that we were saved by His sacrifice, doesn’t make us any less Christian [...] I am but a person and a servant, but I also love having fun and dressing in a cool manner [...] I know that I do God’s work when I love my brother and spread his message through my actions, there is no need for any additional rituals which might scare younger people, but I respect every other congregation that decides to keep things traditional [...] a few months ago we were under heavy fire from other Evangelical congregations in Tijuana thanks to my regular usage of Periscope<sup>7</sup>: there was this incident in which two of my lifelong friends and his wife both got a tattoo of a little anchor<sup>8</sup>, since they have been part of this project since the beginning and they wanted to have a permanent memento; we streamed the event to thank them for being such an important part of the project and, somehow, it got leaked to other churches; they began to claim that we were a sect and that we were forcing our members to tattoo themselves with our logo, it was nuts”. (PD9 2018)

For PD10, having headship status means that he is under more scrutiny, which means that he has to be careful not to hinder other people’s deconstructive processes:

“Times change and forms change with them, this is why I firmly believe in separating our fundamental beliefs from our secondary beliefs [...] for many years there have been stereotypes about christians, I know it because I come from a Pentecostal family: people always assume that we live restrictive and boring lives, without any kind of earthly satisfaction allowed, but the world was created

<sup>7</sup> Periscope is a social networking platform.

<sup>8</sup> Ancla, the name of the church, literally translates to anchor.

by God and we, as christians must gain it back for us [...] even though I feel free to do what I want, as long as it isn't against God himself, I know that people look up to me, and I know that I have brothers who are locked in this struggle between some bad habits and the freedom that Christianity offers, it is because of them that I try not to be a *tripping stone* [...] I do drink alcohol and I like to consume media that could be misinterpreted as non-christian, be it video games or movies, but I like to do that just among my inner circle, not because it is forbidden, but because I don't want to hinder other people who might be fighting an addiction, or might get triggered by my hobbies". (PD10 2018).

PD11 is in his early 20s and has a Pentecostal background. He found Ancla thanks to the recommendations made by his college friends. He also expresses satisfaction in the freedom that separating fundamental and secondary beliefs entails, but he is careful not to over-interpret and prefers to follow postdenominational pastors in his social platforms:

"When I was part of a Pentecostal church, there were very strict unspoken rules about how to behave, most of the secular world was forbidden because it was believed to be tainted and it could lead us to sin; that meant that I could not enjoy most of my hobbies, at least not openly. When became a part of Ancla, no one was judging my lifestyle, instead many people tried to connect with me and understand why I wanted to be part of this community [...] the first thing that changed from my daily routine when I became a full member of Ancla was that, for once, I stopped having the feeling of being watched over. The mandatory praying sessions also came to an end and, instead of being forced to talk to God, I was free to have a personal relationship with Him throughout my day. Now that I am conscious of the freedom that comes with being a Christian, it's not like I'm abusing it, I don't even drink or dance, but I know that I have the freedom to do so whenever I want, and that is a wonderful feeling". (PD11 2018)

For PD12, Jesus's teachings are the core of it all, as a pastor, he tries to instill God's message of love and acceptance among Christians and non-Christians, regardless of their particular denomination:

"Christ is present in every single aspect of my everyday life, which is why we must bring Christ into every aspect of the world, in order to retake it [...] how do I make Him manifest? By trying to get rid of my judgement toward others, even when I don't agree with them [...] I am a sinner, you are a sinner, we are all sinners, and still God loves us [...] God's love is what makes me wake up every day, God's love has made me a privileged person and I try to share this privilege with as many people as I can [...] apart from the tasks that I have to complete as a pastor, I live a pretty common life [...] when I'm not at church, I try to follow my passion and I work on my jokes, I always wanted to be a comedian and perhaps one day I will try doing stand up comedy [...] if you have seen some of my sermons you will notice that I always joke a lot [...] as for my image, well, I have

tattoos and I have an unkempt beard, so I'm not exactly the image that my pentecostal family tried for me to convey, but that's ok, God will not judge us by our looks, but by how much we love". (PD12 2018)

About 60 miles south of Tijuana, the port city of Ensenada holds another PECM congregation in Mexico: Horizonte. This church was established in 1993 under a different name: Calvary Chapel. When the current head pastor took over due to his father's illness, Horizonte stopped being a traditional Evangelical church and it became a *postdenominational* church. Horizonte shares many traits with Ancla, MOSAIC and Central Church: it looks nothing like a church, it is hosted and attended mainly by young adults in their 20s and 30s, and they all dress and look like urban hipsters straight out of art school. The first person that I interviewed at Horizonte was a young musician (PD5) in his mid-20s, whose role was to play guitar during worship sessions:

"I wanted to be a composer but I ended up as a graphical designer in Chihuahua [...] I come from an Evangelical household and even though I love them very much, I did not agree with many of the rules that they followed, particularly those regarding what kind of music we were allowed to listen to [...] since I wanted to compose, I moved out in order to pursue a musical career, that gave me the opportunity to join the local scene in Chihuahua. I enjoyed every moment of it but I never really lost my faith in Christ, nor did I feel that I was losing my religion [...] now that I know about how one's faith can mature, I know I was a little bit more mature in my faith than most of the people in my evangelical congregation [...] now that I'm part of Horizonte, I know for a fact that I never strayed from the path of God, and that his love and his sacrifice made me a free person". (PD5 2018)

Both PD6 and PD7 are a young couple in their mid-30s and late 20s, respectively; both of them expressed that knowing the difference between fundamental and secondary beliefs gave them absolute freedom in their everyday lives:

"We both come from Evangelical and Pentecostal families respectively, when we started to live together without getting married, we were ostracized and heavily criticized, but we never stopped feeling God's presence in our lives [...] We met in college while living in San Diego, California, and that's when we found out about MOSAIC in Los Angeles, we actually tried to visit it on a weekly basis but more than often, our workload made it impossible. Once we finished college we moved to Ensenada and that's when we found out about Horizonte [...] having participated in an inclusive and non-judgmental church made it really hard for us to go back to a conventional church [...] they way our faith has matured has given us a new outlook on life and we are living our lives to the fullest, I don't think we would've been able to do so under a different perspective". (PD6 and PD7 2018)



PD8 is a fresh graduate of Horizonte's leadership school, being in his mid-20s, his is an interesting case, because he is not part of Horizonte's community:

"I went to Horizonte's leadership school because I want to bring about changes in my home congregation; I come from a Pentecostal church and even though I might not share what you could call a liberal outlook on life, I'm eager to diversify our church and make it more attractive to younger people [...] my church is losing younger people by the dozens and I think that it has to do with its outdated views on a number of topics, mainly how we, as Christians, are allowed to consume pop culture and have a closer relationship with the secular world [...] I want people from my congregation to understand that there shouldn't be any guilt or any shunning directed toward people who want to enjoy life's simple pleasures [...] I'm not thinking about bringing radical changes, because I know that they will not work, but I want them to be able to live their daily lives with the peace of mind of not fearing God's retribution because they strayed from an outdated perspective on life". (PD8 2018)

PD13 is the lead pastor in Horizonte, and he makes it very clear when he claims that the Bible and Jesus' love for humankind are the core of every Christian teaching, for him, every shape and form that manifests this is a valid one, although he is quick to recognize that not every form will be popular with every single group and every generation. He was born as part of an Evangelical family and he never planned on taking over his father's church, which was just called Calvary Chapel before his administration. This interview was of particular interest because he addressed the concept of sin among these kinds of churches:

"Just as those who you have already interviewed, I also believe that there are fundamental and secondary beliefs, and that those secondary beliefs are dependent on the historical and cultural contexts of the people who come up with them [...] this church, as you might also have already seen, is strictly against any kind of discrimination, we even have openly gay people serving during services, and we have received a lot of flak for it, and when people ask us: "are you saying that homosexuality is not a sin?", I have to be perfectly clear: from a Christian point of view, homosexuality is a sin and always will be, but so a lot of other things that we humans do: are you living with your girlfriend without having married her? Then you are committing a sinful action that is no worse than homosexuality [...] the trick about being Christian is that judgement will not be placed upon by you, or by any other human. I know that each person is struggling with something, be it alcohol, gambling, a bad marriage, anger issues, etcetera; it is not for us to point out those defects but to embrace the sinner and love him or her with all of our heart, to show him the love of God with our daily actions and our treatment toward them [...] that is one of the reasons as to why we have become such a big community in such a short time: younger generations are eager for inclusive spaces and we must not forget that Christianity is all about inclusivity and loving the sinner, for we are all sinners [...] each one of us is free, but we must also be

conscious enough not to become a *tripping stone* for other brothers or sisters”. (PD13 2018)

PD14 is the head of Horizonte’s leadership school, originally from the US; he was also part of a Calvary Chapel church before moving down to Ensenada due to his close relationship with PD13. PD14 is in his mid-30s and has his body fully covered in tattoos that are not explicitly religious; his chosen style also mimics that of an urban hipster, wearing skinny jeans, jump boots, and vintage shirts:

“The body of Christ is diverse and I will never talk bad or against other christian congregations, since they are just different ways of experiencing the Gospel [...] an ideal church, at least for me, is one in which you can be your true self, without any kind of fear for reprisals [...] I am a huge fan and active consumer of what you call pop culture, I dig secular music and I don’t think that those choices affect, in any way, your worthiness to God [...] as Christians, one of our tasks is to recover that which we have lost over the centuries: the world. During the last eight or so centuries, we were taught that we have to be fearful of *the world*, but we forgot that the world was created by God himself, that is why we need to lose any fear that we might have for it and take it back for our enjoyment [...] I love to talk about God and have these huge discussions on the divine and other grand topics while sipping a beer. Did you know that you can actually evangelize people while chatting with them in the most non-religious spaces that you can think of? I think that this is part of the magic that being free through your faith entails”. (PD14 2018)

PD15 has been attending Horizonte since 2016 and he came from a Baptist background, as with all previous collaborator, he also believes in the concept of being free through his faith:

“Jesus is freedom and I do everything I want without fear of losing his love [...] though I am conscious of sin and what it is, it is precisely that knowledge that allows me to navigate *the world* without much fear [...] I believe that discrimination is one of the vilest forms of sin, so I try to avoid discriminating against anyone in my daily life [...] other than praying in silence every day, I believe that I’m doing God’s work through every single little action that I take and that doesn’t hurt anyone or myself”. (PD15 2018)

Three collaborators from MOSAIC were interviewed for the project. Since MOSAIC has been the blueprint for churches like Ancla and Horizonte, all of the features that were previously described were present in this church, although magnified due to the fact that MOSAIC is located in the Hollywood Walk of Fame near downtown Los Angeles so, in a way, MOSAIC is quite literally in the birthplace of what Banks called a *globalized pop culture* (Banks 1997). PD16 is an openly homosexual youth leader at MOSAIC who left his original congregation due to severe and constant discrimination against his

person, he claims to know the scriptures and declared himself an active follower of other Christian influencers in several social platforms:

“For me, only Jesus saves [...] Jesus is liberating and I know that I am free to follow my heart. I am aware that homosexuality is a sin, but I am also aware that we are all sinners and that we were forgiven by His grace [...] what I like about MOSAIC is that I am free to be myself, I don’t have to pretend and I don’t have to hide my real self [...] I stopped going to the Evangelical church where I grew up because, although they were nice people, they made me feel as if I were unwanted [...] I actually went to another church before MOSAIC, they were really nice and had no real problem with my homosexuality, but they would have never let me be open about it [...] I believe that we all become beacons for God’s love when we love our neighbors instead of hating on them, and that we show our true Christian colors when we love, even when we love our enemies, that’s what it means for me to be a Christian”. (PD16 2018)

PD17 is a female youth leader who also works as a photographer; she is in her mid-20s and comes from a Baptist household; her breakup with her original congregation happened when she left for college; when she started to get involved in the artistic scene of LA, she found out about MOSAIC and decided to remain there:

“The most important thing that I learned in MOSAIC was that Jesus actually understood our human condition and decided to free us from the chains of sin [...] I don’t think that doing earthly things makes us less desirable to the eyes of God [...] one of the things that I love about my new found faith is that I feel free to live my life to the fullest, loving everyone and trying to spread the divine message, which is nothing more than pure, simple love, everything else comes second [...] Christ died for every single human being, regardless of their religion, even if they haven’t accepted Him yet, he loves them equally [...] creating *safe spaces* for everyone, that is what I try to achieve as a Christian, whether in my line of work or during my free time, that’s what this is all about”. (PD17 2018)

PD18, is a pastor who was in the process of establishing a MOSAIC campus in Mexico City, he also showed signs of believing in freedom as a result of believing in Christ:

“You know, the idea that we have absolute freedom to do whatever we want is one of the consequences of the sacrifice that Jesus made for us when he died in the cross [...] it is, of course, our responsibility to know which things will make us grow spiritually and which things will set us back in our journey through this world, whatever people decide to do, we shouldn’t judge, because each one of us is on a particular journey [...] if you feel that someone is going down a path in which they will get hurt, you can of course try to talk to them, if they trust you enough, but I know that my freedom ends where the freedom of my brother begins [...] I was born in an Evangelical household and I did a lot of stupid

things, I even ended up in jail once, but I know for a fact that I paid the consequences for my stupidity and that God never stopped loving me [...] my life is now devoted to spread His message, and to let other people know that they need to be free and enjoy this marvelous gift that is His creation”. (PD 19 2020)

Central Church advertises itself as a “place where it’s okay not to be okay”<sup>9</sup> and it shares the same elements that were present in Ancla, Horizonte, and MOSAIC. PD19 is a bassist and he was the person who was able to set in motion the snowball that made every other interview possible. PD19 is in his late 20s and was born in Chihuahua:

“My family has been Evangelical ever since I remember, I used to go to Vino Nuevo, sometimes I still visit them [...] when our band started to become famous in the independent scene, we began to travel a lot [...] at one point, me and my bandmates started to create Christian songs without using explicit Christian terminology, and people started to love our songs [...] we ended up playing at bars and clubs where secular people partied [...] I realized that we could enjoy the earthly things that we loved doing without being in conflict with God [...] I learned to distinguish between what some people call *fundamental beliefs* and *secondary beliefs* [...] at one point, and now I believe it to be divine providence, I moved to Henderson, Nevada; I had already heard about Central Church and how it was a different kind of church, so I started attending and I eventually ended up being part of it [...] thanks to it I made a lot of contacts and I learned about this new postmodern way of living the Gospel, and it made me feel a freedom that I had never felt before [...] it is amazing being able to do what you love without having to be constantly worrying if you’re angering God or not [...] God is love and he wants us to retake *the world*”. (PD19 2018)

PD20, also in his late 20s, is a youth leader, he comes from a family with a Pentecostal background and still believes in some of the ritual aspects of Pentecostalism, but he knows that they can scare people away from Christ’s message of love, so he strategizes when and who to talk about them, regardless of it, he believes that the most important thing that a Christian has is freedom:

“The more mature that your faith becomes, the more freedom that you are able to enjoy when navigating this mortal world, but you have to be careful not to scare people away, just like with my Pentecostal beliefs, mainly that the Holy Ghost can possess you and pass divine gifts onto you; I know that not everybody believes it, and I know that people can even look weird at me if I tell them that I believe that, but those are secondary beliefs [...] the most important belief shared across every other denomination is that Christ died for us, and that his blood made us free [...] though I retain a lot of my old *secondary beliefs*, I also acquired additional *secondary beliefs*, mainly that the so-called secular world is

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.centralonline.tv>

not so much a secular world, but a world that is part of God's divine creation, and we are meant to enjoy it and reappropriate it". (PD20 2018).

These 20 excerpts were chosen to highlight not just the way in which PECM Christians adapt their faith to a specific cultural and generational context but also to show the ways in which they *live* their religion. By assuming the existence of *fundamental beliefs*, *secondary beliefs*, and *freedom through faith maturity*, their everyday lives become, in essence, religious by nature.

For Ammerman, we must look for "the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life, in addition to listening for how people explain themselves" (Ammerman 2014:190). Breaking down the narrative elements expressed by the interviewees allows us to mesh the *lived religion* approach with the ethnographic data that was obtained in the field. The bits of information contained in Table 2 give a rough idea of how important it is for PECM Christians in northwestern Mexico to distance themselves from what they perceive to be restrictive and judgmental environments, similar to those that they experienced in their previous Evangelical or Pentecostal congregations. While it is expected to encounter different types of practices and activities linked to the *lived religion* domains proposed by Ammerman, PECM churches make it possible to conceive the religious potential of any given activity or action, as long as it is not obviously sinful. PD13 resumed the posture that PECMs have regarding sin: every human is a sinner, and there are well defined acts of sinning that should be avoided if possible, but people will not be judged or ostracized if they cannot avoid committing those acts. The bid for inclusiveness might seem like an obvious contradiction when homosexuality is still considered a sin within PECM congregations, but if we take their context into account, it will become clear that homosexuality is considered as sinful as having tattoos or wearing makeup, or having premarital sex. In that regard, not only do PECM congregations welcome all kinds of sinners into their abodes, they also create *safe spaces* where "it's ok not to be ok" and where social stigma is diminished when compared to other Christian churches; considering this, one of the tenets of these PECM congregations is to "take back the *world*", meaning that Christians have been separated from God's divine creation in its entirety and it must be recovered for their enjoyment.

Table 1 also brings about the question of class and gender into the analysis: all of the interviewees are *millennials*, and while it is common to think of this category as just an age range, it also implies specific social, cultural, and political traits. *Millennials* are individuals born between 1982 and 1996; *millennials* are digital natives and have a strong sense of community at a global scale, they value political engagement and are conscious regarding health, social, economical and environmental issues; a key aspect for the sake of this paper is that *millennials* value diversity and are generally outraged by social injustice; *millennials* also value individuality and are entrepreneurially-minded; most of all, they are increasingly liberal with regard to social and cultural issues (Fisher 2018; Schewe et al. 2013). While this might be true for US-based *millennials*, not every Mexican born between 1982 and 1996 would be considered a *millennial*: in 2016, only 21.3% of Mexican households had internet access, on top of that, the structural inequalities in Mexico mean that only middle and upper-middle classes can fulfill some if not all of the traits that define the *millennial* generation in the US (De la Garza et al. 2020; Gómez et al. 2018; Reguillo 2017). This means that

**Table 2** Lived religion domains in *postdenominational* Christians (Source: in-situ fieldwork and in-depth interviews)

Subject	Embodiment domain	Discourse domain	Materiality domain
PD1	Secular pleasure and enjoyment as an important element of his lifestyle.	Personal relationship with God. Believes in <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> .	Enjoys and produces secular music. Drinking and smoking marijuana in moderation is not sinful. Hipster style clothing and medium sized beard.
PD2	Leisure and enjoyment of secular activities are important for him.	Personal relationship with God; God's creation is to be enjoyed. Christians should not discriminate against anyone.	Has non-religious tattoos and believes that they represent freedom from restrictive rules. Hipster style clothing.
PD3	Being a single mother as a testament of her faith	Personal relationship with God; Believes non-discriminating is a Christian duty. Feminism and women empowerment can coexist with Christianity.	Abstains from using religious imagery and does not follow specific rituals. Hipster style clothing.
PD4	Discomfort with "over the top" rituals; prefers low-key religion.	Personal relationship with God; wants to enjoy <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> but does not feel ready yet. Inclusiveness is a must for Christian people.	Values low-key and private religious experiences; wants to enjoy the secular world. Hipster style clothing. Has non-religious tattoos.
PD5	Does not feel shame or regret for enjoying and wanting to be part of the secular world.	Personal relationship with God; wants to pursue a musical career, not necessarily a religious one; believes in <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> .	Hipster style clothing and minimalistic non-religious tattoos. Does not use any overtly religious imagery.
PD6 and PD7	Enjoyment and living life to its full potential is fundamental.	Personal relationship with God. Non-judgmental inclusiveness is a must in any Christian congregation. Believe in <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> .	Living together without being married as a statement. Hipster style clothing. Uses a small minimalistic ornamental crucifix that blends with other jewelry. PD6 has a small non-religious tattoo.
PD8	Being able to enjoy life's simplest pleasures without guild is important for him.	Believes that shaming people for not rejecting the secular world is outdated. More conservative than the rest of the interviewees because he still belongs to a Pentecostal congregation, but he is willing to make changes.	Plain clothes that made him stand out from the rest of the congregants. No tattoos. Does not drink nor smoke.
PD9	Having fun and enjoying life are important elements of being Christian	We were saved by Jesus' sacrifice and it allows us to have fun. We must respect other congregations even if they are more restrictive. Preaches about <i>fundamental/secondary</i> beliefs. Inclusiveness is important.	Hipster style clothing, no tattoos. His sermons are delivered in an informal <i>cool</i> language, akin to a stand-up comedy session.
PD10	Secular pleasure and enjoyment as an important element of his lifestyle.	There are <i>fundamental</i> and <i>secondary</i> beliefs, there is <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> but people should be	Hipster style clothing, non-religious tattoos; drinks alcohol and consumes non-religious entertainment.

Table 2 (continued)

Subject	Embodiment domain	Discourse domain	Materiality domain
		careful of not <i>tripping</i> other brothers/sisters.	
PD11	Pleasure and enjoyment without being afraid of any judgement.	There are <i>fundamental</i> and <i>secondary</i> beliefs. Personal relationship with God; believes in <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> .	No tattoos; hipster style clothing. His faith materializes through his freedom to enjoy secular activities without any guilt.
PD12	Laughter and enjoying life as fundamental elements of a Christian lifestyle.	Preaches about <i>fundamental/secondary</i> beliefs and <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> . Inclusiveness as a core element of his sermons.	Tattoos, long beard; hipster style clothing. Following personal passions and making people laugh are ways to spread God's love.
PD13	Finding joy and loving others makes you feel good and heals your soul.	Preaches about <i>fundamental/secondary</i> beliefs but he is not afraid to call out what sin is, although it should not be used to shame. Promotes inclusiveness and <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> .	Hipster style clothing; small beard, no tattoos. Drinks and listens to secular music.
PD14	Leisure and enjoyment of secular activities without fearing retribution.	Promotes <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> and inclusiveness. Christians need to retake the <i>secular world</i> since it is a divine creation.	Completely tattooed with non-religious and religious designs; hipster style clothing. Drinks alcohol. Consumes secular entertainment. Short beard.
PD15	Enjoys that he will not lose God's favor by enjoying the world.	Personal relationship with God. Believes in <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> , Christian congregations must be free of any form of discrimination.	Hipster style clothing, non-religious tattoos. Low-key praying. Believes he is doing God's work through every single action that does not hurt anyone or himself.
PD16	His homosexuality is a conduit for showing God's grace. Faith makes him feel accepted even though he knows that it is sinful.	Only Jesus saves; we are all sinners but God loves us. To be Christian is to love the sinner, to love everyone regardless of their identity.	Hipster style clothing; non-religious tattoos. The freedom provided by his beliefs allows him to enjoy the world and his non-secular activities.
PD17	Living life to the fullest and spreading love comes first, because it reflects her love for God.	Believes in <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> . Christian congregations have to be inclusive toward every minority.	Hipster style clothing; non-religious tattoos; creating <i>safe spaces</i> is her way of doing God's work.
PD18	Enjoying God's creation is important for him on a daily basis.	Preaches about <i>fundamental/secondary</i> beliefs and that getting to know God allows for a wider range of freedom. We must care about our brothers/sisters and learn from our mistakes, but we have to enjoy the <i>world</i> .	Hipster style clothing; heavily tattooed with non-religious and religious tattoos; Spreading Jesus' message of love and freedom through his daily activities.
PD19	Being a Christian gives him peace of mind when he interacts with the secular world.	Makes a distinction between <i>fundamental</i> and <i>secondary</i> beliefs and believes in <i>freedom through faith</i>	Hipster style clothing; does not have tattoos. Used to drink but stopped because he is in a position in which he can be a

Table 2 (continued)

Subject	Embodiment domain	Discourse domain	Materiality domain
		<i>maturity</i> . Churches have to be inclusive and they need to stop judging others. God wants us to enjoy his creation.	<i>tripping stone</i> to others. Doing what he loves without fear of divine retribution is how he pleases God.
PD20	Loves feeling safe from not angering God by existing.	Knows about the existence of <i>fundamental</i> and <i>secondary</i> beliefs. Christ died to free us. Believes the secular world must be retaken without fear. Believes in <i>freedom through faith maturity</i> .	Hipster style clothing; non-religious tattoos; when he enjoys God's creation, he is also pleasing Him.

PECM congregations in Mexico are mainly composed of middle and upper-middle class young adults that fully embrace the *millennial* archetype. This also means that in spite of the progressive traits that Mexican PECM congregations have, they are also unconsciously exclusive, not just because of their *postmodern-hipster* vibe, but also because in order to be a *postmodern-hipster* individual one must have a certain social and economic status. This would also explain why other *postdenominational* congregations thrived mostly in first-world countries such as the USA, the UK, Australia, a small number of European countries and upper-middle class Brazil (Cusack 2011; Rocha 2017). Regarding gender, even though only three female *postdenominational* collaborators were interviewed, all three expressed satisfaction with the horizontal structure of their congregations, allowing not just for the allocation of women in positions of power (female pastors, headships, and department leaders), but also for the possibility of openly homosexual congregants of helping with church duties; nonetheless, it is necessary to dig deeper on these implications, considering that the more conservative Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the region use those elements to attack the legitimacy of PECM congregations (Ibarra 2019).

*Discourse, embodiment, and materiality* among PECM congregants gravitates around the idea of sacralizing *secular* spaces and activities, as well as *progressive* ideas via the *fundamental/secondary* beliefs dyad and the idea of *freedom through faith maturity*. These elements allow for PECM Christians to embody and materialize expressions and sensations that more conservative Christians would have difficulty dealing with. This is also why PECM Christians have less judgmental views toward stigmatized activities such as alcohol and recreational drug consumption, LGBT rights, tattoos, fashion, and partying in general; it also explains why congregations like MOSAIC have been vocal regarding social issues, just as it happened during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020<sup>10</sup>, and why Ancla, Horizonte, and Central Church are determined not to discriminate against the LGBT community and to welcome diversity in its full spectrum, in spite of believing that some elements performed by that diverse crowd are sinful by nature. PECM congregations, therefore, are more than a *superficial and postmodern* take on Christianity, they also promote, as Marti and Ganiel concluded, a deconstructed church based on experimentation, sensibility,

<sup>10</sup> <https://mosaic.org/CAPTURE-THE-MOMENT>



diversification and a general awareness of inequalities and social justice (Marti and Ganiel 2014).

## Conclusions

The transnational networking capabilities provided by the TESN in northwestern Mexico, coupled with the groundwork laid by *postdenominational* churches in SoCal, allowed for PECM congregations to emerge in northwestern Mexico. The close relationship between Evangelical-Pentecostal-Neopentecostal/Charismatic and PECM congregations poses a challenge, considering how PECM communities are frequently thrown into the Evangelical-Pentecostal mix. Furthermore, many middle- and upper-middle class Evangelical, Pentecostal, Neopentecostal/Charismatic, and non-denominational congregations are influenced by Hillsong's approach to worship and preaching, which makes it harder for researchers to distinguish them from actual *postdenominational* churches. Therein lies the importance of doing ethnographic fieldwork and using a micro-sociological lens. Analyzing life-stories and personal narratives using a *lived religion* framework shows the extent of agency that each individual has and makes it possible to identify discursive and material elements that could hint at deeper deconstructive processes. For PECM congregations, it is not just about beards, tattoos or being *cool kids*, it is also about creating religious communities aimed at individuals that share similar values and expectations given their particular social and cultural expectations. Be that as it may, PECM congregations are involuntarily exclusive, for even when they embrace diversity, seekers are expected to share similar generational and class-related patterns of consumption, which become difficult to achieve in developing countries such as Mexico. Future lines of inquiry on this phenomenon could dig deeper into the social and economic discrepancies that PECM congregations will have to address as it expands into Latin America. On the other hand, Latin American religious studies need to update their classificatory categories when it comes to explaining religious diversity in the region. Postdenominationalism is a largely unused term in Latin America, and churches like Ancla and Horizonte are commonly misclassified as either Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Charismatic/Neopentecostal (Garma 2004; Jaimes and Montalvo 2019), which in turn has led to a lesser understanding on how religious identities have changed and evolved over the course of the last three decades. Long-term implications of PECM congregations in the region are hard to predict, in five years, Ancla went from 50 to over 5000 members; Horizonte also went from 200 to almost 4000 in the same span of time; while this kind of growth might seem impressive, *postdenominational* membership still pales in comparison to the numbers seen in Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Neopentecostal/Charismatic megachurches; still, PECM congregations reach audiences of over 30,000 thanks to their digital and merchandising resources (Ibarra 2019; Gomes 2020); on top of it, the COVID-19 lockdowns could have played in their favor, considering the number of individuals that resorted to safe-distancing and digital platforms for their daily routines. PECM churches are also a problem for the INEGI, the 2020 census saw a significant increase in the number of Mexicans *without religion*, reaching an all-time high of 13,314,516 individuals, representing 10.6% of the total of the surveyed population. The 2010 census reported only 5,262,546 Mexicans *without*

*religion*; probable causes that would explain increase in these numbers could be attributed to the many interferences caused by the COVID-19 lockdowns when INEGI's personnel visited each household or to the fact that, for the first time in Mexican history, the questionnaires were digitally applied (INEGI 2020). Still, many PECM members were not concise when it came to talking about their religious adscription: PECM congregations are usually referred to as *communities* by their members; when asked to describe their religious adscription, it was common for PECM Christians to say that they had no religion, and that they only believed in Jesus' teachings (Ibarra 2019). One final thing to consider is that, although PECM congregations could seem to be generationally locked, their innovative way of *sacralizing the secular world* has echoed among younger middle and upper-class Christians, considering that both Ancla and Tijuana have important leadership and pastoral schools; future research efforts should be able to measure how much of an impact and how influential PECM congregations really were.

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**Code Availability** N/A

## Declarations

**Conflicts of Interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethics Approval** This research was approved by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.

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