

## María Atkinson and the Rise of Pentecostalism in the U.S. - Mexico Borderlands

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### Abstract

María Atkinson is one of the most important women in the history of Pentecostalism in Mexico. She helped to establish the Mexican branch of the Church of God as well as Spanish-speaking churches in the American southwest. Yet, she remains a neglected figure among American historians of Pentecostalism. Some of this neglect is due to the fact that the study of Pentecostalism among Latinos is still in its infancy. Our study aims to correct this neglect, by providing a study of the life and work of María Atkinson within the socio-historical context of northern Mexico. Atkinson may be seen as an agent of an Americanization program encouraged by the Church of God and paralleled by American corporations. In particular, she became a conduit of Appalachian religious practices. In addition, this study explores the sociology behind Atkinson's meteoric rise and eventual eclipse in the Mexican branch of the Church of God.

### Introduction

[1] The study of the role of women in Pentecostalism is still in its infancy, but already scholarly biographies are available for many important Euroamerican Pentecostal women such as Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944; see Bluhmhofer) and Kathryn Kuhlman (1907-1976; see Warner). Many Latina Pentecostal leaders, however, are still unrecognized even by Pentecostal scholars. This neglect by academic historians is, in part, due to the neglect of Hispanics in the study of American religious history.<sup>1</sup> Thus, a recent bibliography on women in church history bears some thirty entries on African-American women, but only one full entry under the heading of "Hispanic" (Blevins: 71). Perhaps equally important is the fact that the study of the Latino/Latina religious experience in general is still an emerging field.<sup>2</sup>

[2] This study centers on one of these still largely unrecognized Hispanic Pentecostal women, María Rivera Atkinson, who helped to establish the Mexican branch of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN). Her lack of recognition is highlighted by the fact that she is not even included in the *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (1988), which focuses on Pentecostals. A denominational biography has been written about her by Peggy Scarborough/Humphrey, a member of the Church of God. W. W. Elliott, another Church of God scholar, has written a sociological study of Mexican Pentecostalism that includes discussion of Atkinson. But Atkinson has not been the focus of a non-denominational scholarly biography which places her in the social and historical context of her time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For treatments of the Hispanic religious experience in the U.S., see Dolan and Deck; Dolan and Vidal; Dolan and Hinojosa; and Sandoval.

<sup>2</sup> On the emergence of the study of Latino religion and theology, see Deck; Maduro (1994). See suggestions for the sociological study of Pentecostals in Maduro (1996); Peña. For women in Latin America, see Acosta-Belén; Bose.

<sup>3</sup> The main denominational biography was written by Peggy Scarborough, with an earlier version written under her maiden name, Humphrey.

[3] Yet, the significance of Atkinson's work is substantial, especially as the primary leader of the effort to establish in Mexico the American-born Church of God. The Mexican branch of the Church of God began with just over forty members in 1932, but by 1993 the denomination had reported about 53,000 members in Mexico (Palazuelos: 21). This is one reason why María Rivera Atkinson is called the "mother of Mexico" by many in her denomination.

[4] Equally important is that the ministry of María Atkinson provides an opportunity to explore some broader issues of female leadership and the importance of socio-economic class in Pentecostalism in the U.S. Mexico-Borderlands. Atkinson's own experience with cancer also provides a case study in the role of Pentecostalism as an alternative health care system. In addition, Atkinson exemplifies how Latin American converts to American-born religious movements transmitted American religious and societal values. For many Americans, Latin American missionary activity was conceived as an extension of the evangelization of the American frontier (Baldwin: 19-20; for a Pentecostal perspective, see Robeck). Accordingly, Atkinson affords us an excellent case study in the interplay of religion and society in the U.S. Mexico-Borderlands.

### Sources

[5] Perhaps the most significant problem in the production of synthetic works on Hispanic Pentecostalism is the assembly and critical collation of basic sources. Much of what is written is still based on secondary sources. This study of María Atkinson relies on written and oral sources. Oral sources include interviews, conducted by the author, with individuals who knew Atkinson personally. These interviews were collected on various field trips to Sonora and Arizona from 1991 to the present. The most important informants include Luciano Ramos (d. 1994) and Uriel Felix Avilez, two of Atkinson's early collaborators. Such informants form a dwindling resource because most of them are of an advanced age.

[6] One may distinguish three basic types of written sources, all of which still need to be sifted, collected, and systematically studied. One source are biographies written by Church of God chroniclers, and of particular importance are the biographies by Scarborough/ Humphrey. These must be studied critically because they promote denominational agendas and goals. A second, related source are the church periodicals, especially *El Evangelio*, which provide much raw data about basic events such as church openings and other activities by Atkinson. The correspondence written by Atkinson herself forms our third, but meager, source. The correspondence used in this study was found in the archives of the Pentecostal Research Center of the Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee.<sup>4</sup>

### Early Life

[7] According to the biography by Humphrey, María Atkinson was born in Alamos, Sonora, Mexico on September 2, 1879 to a relatively affluent family (16). Winston Elliott notes: "The family was one of the higher-class, white, creole groups owning land and possessing mining interests in the area" (105). Albina Rivera, María's mother, died shortly after her birth. Her father, who was involved in a variety of enterprises, remarried in 1886, and died in 1894. For

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<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Christopher Thomas and other members of the Church of God School of Theology for their assistance in researching the archives of the Pentecostal Research Center in Cleveland, TN.

much of her early years, María lived in Alamos. She was also taught by private tutors, which was characteristic of her privileged status in Alamos.

[8] Eventually she and her siblings became educators. María at first worked closely with her sister, Albina, in Bacanoros, Sonora. She met the man who became her first husband, Dionisio Chomina, when she moved to Sahuaripa, Sonora. He had been a principal at a boys' school when they met, but subsequently he worked in a railroad office. Shortly after Mr. Chomina was transferred to Douglas, Arizona, he died. In 1905, María made her home in Hermosillo, Sonora.

[9] María established a more permanent residence in the United States sometime around 1916, in the midst of the Mexican civil strife. At the time, she was working in Mexico as a nurse for American physicians who moved back to the mining town of Douglas, Arizona. She left the nursing profession when one of the physicians died, and the other moved to Los Angeles. Thereupon, María opened a dress-making shop. It was as a result of her interaction with a client that she met Mark Atkinson, the man that became her second husband in 1920.

[10] In 1924 María was told by a doctor that she had cancer. She sought treatment in various cities, including El Paso, Bisbee, Phoenix and Tucson. However, a washwoman named María Ybarra and her sister Carmen, are credited with providing Atkinson with her introduction to the Pentecostal faith. María Ybarra initially visited Atkinson and spoke to her about faith healing. Carmen then introduced her to the Pentecostal tradition. María's health soon improved, and that improvement convinced Atkinson of the power of faith healing and the truth of Pentecostalism.

[11] Shortly thereafter she joined the Assemblies of God, received ministerial recognition, and opened up her own church in Douglas, Arizona. According to Humphrey, María's services were accompanied by ecstatic experiences and speaking in tongues that she did not know how to explain at first (50). Scarborough also reports that Atkinson had some sort of near-death experience that involved visions of heaven (11). In those visions Atkinson reports that God called her to missionary work, thus establishing a decisive turn in her life. Since her husband was reportedly unwilling to convert, María decided to follow her missionary endeavors without her husband. In 1926, after the marriage of her daughter, she decided to devote herself to full-time missionary work in northern Mexico.

[12] Atkinson's association with the Church of God began in Douglas, Arizona in 1931, after a meeting with James H. Ingram, who was then that denomination's primary missionary to Mexico. Apparently, Ingram convinced Atkinson that the Church of God could provide the resources needed in helping her mission in Mexico (Humphrey: 58). In 1932 she and Ingram officially established, in Obregón, Sonora, the first church in Mexico under the sponsorship of the Church of God. The congregation consisted of some forty-three members and three preachers. She continued to help found numerous other churches for the Church of God in Northern Mexico and in Douglas, Arizona.

### **Pentecostalism as an Alternative Health Care System**

[13] Atkinson's conversion exemplifies the role that health care plays in attracting converts to new religious movements. Many new religious traditions begin as alternative health care systems, or promote alternative health care as a main component. Christian Science, for example, may be seen as a new American religious tradition that focused on providing a health care system (Fuller). Atkinson herself was attracted to Pentecostalism because of health care concerns. She

did not find the desired remedy in conventional health care or in the Catholic tradition. Her initial visits to the Pentecostal church and subsequent conversion came because, in large part, she perceived the Pentecostal healing practices to be superior.

[14] Pentecostalism, from its very beginnings, emphasized healing (Hollenweger 1972: 353-76). Equally important is that Pentecostalism seems to flourish in areas where conventional health care is not easily accessible or where conventional health care has not brought satisfactory results. Murl Dirksen, who has conducted an intensive study of health care perceptions in the village of Pakal-Na in southern Mexico, found that only 15% of Pentecostals in his sample had a high degree of confidence toward modern medicine, compared to 74% for non-Pentecostals (98). Likewise, Dirksen found that only 6% of Pentecostals in his sample expressed a high degree of confidence toward hospitals and doctors, compared to 57% for non-Pentecostals (101).

[15] During the initial stages of Pentecostalism in Mexico, life expectancy was quite poor, placed at some 30 years in 1940 (Hunt: 131). Moreover, Mexico's health care has been geographically and socio-economically unbalanced for most of this century. Linda Hunt comments: "It is therefore common for extensive health care to be concentrated in large cities and towns as rewards for key occupational groups, whereas the services available to the marginalized groups remains minimal" (131).

[16] As the case of Teresa Urrea indicates, female faith healers were not unknown in Sonora prior to Atkinson. Urrea was a woman whose fame as a healer at the turn of the century led to her being viewed as a political threat by many in Sonora. Urrea, however, never seemed interested in systematically promoting her unique mixture of folk Indian practices and Catholicism as a new health care system (see Gil; Rodriguez and Rodriguez).

[17] María Atkinson, however, promoted the value of Pentecostal health care in a systematic manner. This was not only evident in her sermons, but also in the banner that included the words "Jesus Heals" (*Jesús sana*) displayed at the altar in many of her services. Many of her early converts, including Luciano Ramos, first visited her church, in part, because of his search for healing.

[18] Indeed, the promise of healing promoted by Atkinson was perhaps the most important factor in attracting new converts. Faith healing, even if it does not always produce desired effects, at least does not cost as much as a conventional system that may be equally ineffective. Indeed, Atkinson never was completely healthy, lapsing even into a coma shortly after her conversion (Humphrey: 51). In truth, we cannot verify the reliability of Atkinson's initial diagnosis of cancer. But all things being equal, patients may perceive faith healing as an advantage simply because it is not as economically burdensome as conventional health care. In addition, a Pentecostal congregation may provide other means of emotional and social support that conventional health clinics or other denominations do not, at least from a patient's perception.

### **Atkinson as a Female Leader**

[19] Female leadership of religious groups was not a common social institution in Mexico. Yet, as noted by Humphrey, Atkinson's ability to direct men was quite subtle: "Though she guided and directed, the men were never aware of it" (121). But how was a woman able to command such acceptance and religious authority in a society supposedly dominated by machismo? Humphrey does not really provide an extensive answer.

[20] The whole notion of machismo, or male dominance, as a distinctive aspect of Latino culture has been the subject of great debate (Stephen). Some scholars see it as a real and distinctive aspect of Latin American culture. Stevens, for instance, defines machismo as a distinctive notion of masculinity in Latin America that is characterized by “exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male relationships and arrogance and sexual aggressiveness in male-to-female relationships” (90). Brusco sees such a notion as an inaccurate stereotype that is not borne out by anthropological field work. But regardless of whether there is a distinctive notion of masculinity that deserves to be called “machismo,” it is clear that men were not accustomed to seeing women in positions of authority over men in most of the principal political and religious institutions of Mexico. Mexicans certainly were not accustomed to seeing women in positions of authority over men in the Catholic tradition. Accordingly, it is important to ask how Atkinson was able to achieve a leadership position in such a culture.

[21] Our tentative conclusion is that Atkinson’s ability to exercise power stemmed from important features of her socio-economic class and personality. First, Atkinson’s long experience as a schoolteacher seems to have encouraged her use of authority. As a teacher, she was reportedly a strict disciplinarian, who did not shy away from using physical punishment on children she thought were disobedient (Humphrey: 25). As an educational administrator and organizer, she was very strong-willed and independent.

[22] The informants to whom I spoke also suggest that her power was indeed based on socio-economic class and experience as a teacher. In general, Atkinson’s education, even if not great by American standards, was quite unusual in Mexico, where female literacy was often less than half of the male literacy rate around 1930 (Vaughn: 110). Many of her early male converts were poorly educated. Uriel Felix, for example, was a Mexican Indian with little education. Luciano Ramos was also poorly educated. Some of these men were already accustomed to subservient attitudes toward the upper class, and Atkinson seems to have expected subservience from persons in lower socio-economic rungs. Thus, Uriel Felix was said to be “always obedient to her” (Humphrey: 64). Luciano Ramos recounts how impressed he was by Atkinson’s white dress and white skin color. Ramos indicates that such were the marks of an upper-class “lady.”

[23] Humphrey herself records that Atkinson conducted adult worship services as she would a children’s school class (67). Elliott notes, concerning Atkinson’s treatment of adult converts, that even in prayer, she would “interrupt them as they prayed so that they might learn how to express themselves as she felt they should” (108). Elliott also records that she would resort to humiliating some of the male converts in public when evaluating their performance:

Sometimes she would not wait for the informal conference to correct them but would do so in public by letting them know that they were taking too long in finishing a sermon or in directing an activity. . . . However, as long as she lived, she continued her system of discussing with the ministers any fault she saw in their activities and continued her maternalistic authority over ministers who apparently never, in her thinking, ceased to be apprentices (111-13).

[24] As a leader in the church, Atkinson would even resort to physical discipline with adults just as she had done with children when she was a teacher. For example, Atkinson once attempted to strike Uriel Felix’s wife for disobedience. Uriel’s wife, however, resisted and informed Atkinson that, while she respected her in the pulpit, such behavior would not be tolerated outside the

pulpit. Such behavior by Atkinson again points to her sense of entitlement, even to physical violence, when dealing with persons she perceived to be beneath her class.

[25] Not all men in her churches, however, were willing to submit to her leadership. Humphrey records that some men found her “domineering” (61). A few men already had been ministers in other denominations or churches prior to joining the Church of God. Some of them eventually broke with Atkinson, and founded their own churches. It is clear, then, that her most loyal male following consisted of the more poorly educated members of her congregation.

[26] Barfoot and Sheppard, who have studied the role of women in Pentecostal movements, argue that women ministers seem to be most prominent in the early stages of new Pentecostal movements. But as the movement congeals into a more structured denomination, male power gains at the expense of female power. This was clearly the case with María Atkinson. For example, Fernando Gonzalez was one of Atkinson’s first converts and apprentices. Yet, as Elliott notes: “Gradually more of the leadership authority passed into his hands as he became more capable” (107). When there were sufficient churches in the late 1940s to require a supervisor to oversee them, Ingram chose Gonzalez, not Atkinson, for this task. During the latter part of her ministry Atkinson does not appear to have been even considered for any higher office.

[27] Atkinson certainly was a role model for many women aspiring to leadership positions in the Church of God. But even under Atkinson, women such as Ramoncita Montoya, one of the first women converts who worked with Atkinson, were steered toward leadership in women’s groups. Other women did not have the education or experience of Atkinson. Most of the other Church of God women in Mexico did not speak English, and so did not have access to the powers in the denomination’s headquarters in Tennessee that actually made many of the decisions concerning the Mexican churches.

[28] Atkinson herself was often willing to promote male members to leadership positions even if there might be better educated female members available. Thus, Luciano Ramos recounts how Atkinson practically ordered him to assume leadership responsibilities in the church despite the fact that other members objected that he was not well educated. Indeed, the number of males that she ordained in positions of leadership in the Church of God in northern Mexico would eventually outnumber females, even when many of the churches bore larger proportions of women.

[29] In sum, while Mexican men were not accustomed to seeing women in positions of authority in most political and religious institutions of Mexico, many of them were willing to submit to a more educated woman perceived to belong to the upper class. In the case of Atkinson, she felt confident, by virtue of her experience as a teacher to exert authority over males. Atkinson’s charisma, though less well documented, may also explain her ability to achieve a following among men of a lower income and educational level.

### **The Socio-Historical Context of Her Ministry**

[30] Atkinson’s main field of missionary labor was in Sonora, a state which shares much of its border with Arizona. In many aspects, Sonora, especially at the border, was more connected to the United States than to the Mexican centers of power. Its proximity to the United States was one obvious reason. Moreover, railroad links between Sonora and the United States developed before the advent of a link between Sonora and Mexico City (Hall: 13).

[31] Numerous American companies had been established in Sonora, especially in the mining and agricultural sectors of the economy. Companies such as Phelps Dodge and the Cananea Realty company sometimes controlled the government, police force, banks, educational institutions, and many other important aspects of Mexican border towns (Heyman: 27-30). Thus, in Cananea, the first mayors were actually officials of the Phelps Dodge company (Heyman: 30). The job of these company officials was, in large part, to transmit and enforce the policies of American companies among Mexican workers. American companies sought to train Mexicans in the American way of doing things. Despite some civil unrest caused by American employment policies, the perceived acceptance of American cultural superiority was a fact of life for many Mexicans in the borderlands.

[32] Protestantism had made its first significant inroads into Mexico with the rise of Porfirio Díaz, a dictator who held power for most of the period of 1881-1911. Although the northern Mexican states held high concentrations of Protestants relative to other regions of Mexico, the total number of Protestants was still very small in the decades just prior to Atkinson's work. In 1905 in Sonora, for example, the number of Protestants was placed at 1,913 (Baldwin: 60) in a state with a population of approximately 221,000 (Baldwin: 37). The Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopal denominations were the most prominent, and their missions were stationed in larger cities such as Guaymas and Hermosillo (Baldwin: 37). Women missionaries, though never a majority, were not unknown prior to María Atkinson. In 1888, for example, the number of foreign female missionaries in Mexico, as counted by twelve principal mission boards, is placed at 67 (Baldwin: 24).

[33] The Catholic Church, which had labored in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to establish lasting missions in Sonora, allowed many of its missions to languish by the nineteenth century. The lack of a strong official Catholic presence led to anticlerical sentiments among the elite of Sonora. Indeed, some of the most anticlerical Mexican presidents came from Sonora. Álvaro Obregón, for example, was one of the most anticlerical Mexican presidents. He was born in the district of Alamos, María Atkinson's birthplace. Linda Hall, the biographer of Álvaro Obregón, notes: "Sonora was different from the rest of Mexico in other respects as well. In this overwhelmingly Catholic country most Sonorans were not religious and many were rabidly anticlerical" (12).

[34] In the initial stages of her ministry, Mexico was indeed dominated by an anticlerical attitude in the government. A constitution had been approved in 1917 that contained a number of anticlerical measures. Such measures were enacted in earnest during the presidency of Plutarco Elias Calles, who, in effect, suspended the practice of Catholicism on July 31, 1926. Mass, baptism, and religious marriages were banned. Such measures prompted an anti-government revolt, the so-called Cristero War, which tentatively ended in 1929 when the government relaxed its prohibitions (for a discussion of the Cristero rebellion, see Meyer; for the history of Mexico, see Camín and Meyer). Nevertheless, much anticlericalism persisted into the 1930s. Although the anticlerical measures were particularly aimed at curbing the power of the Catholic Church, churches of all denominations were affected. Accordingly, much of Atkinson's early efforts centered on acquiring the proper permits to establish places of worship. At the same time, Atkinson had to contend with ministers of other denominations who were hostile to her activities and to Pentecostalism in general.

[35] The anticlerical attitude of the government helped the rise of Protestantism in many indirect ways. For example, although Catholic priests were again allowed in Mexico, there was a limit of one priest per 50,000 inhabitants in Sonora during part of the 1930s (Hargrave: 20). Since Protestant ministers were not subject to this limit, a community could theoretically bear many more Protestant ministers than Catholic priests.

[36] Such restrictions on the Catholic Church also meant that there were many Catholics who did not have ready access to priests. For example, around 1934, when the Church of God established one of its early missions in the border town of Agua Prieta, Sonora, there was no Catholic priest or Catholic church at all in that town (Hargrave: 36). When, in the 1930s, the nuns of the Company of Mary attempted to recruit young Latina women for its newly founded school in Douglas, Arizona, they encountered much difficulty due to the lack of a strong Catholic tradition in those parts of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Goldsmith: 186). Protestants, in sum, were able to fill empty niches in many towns of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (on the success of Protestantism in Latin America, see Martin; Stoll).

### **Appalachia in Sonora**

[37] Although denominational biographers portray Atkinson as the mother of Mexico, a case can be made that Atkinson was, in fact, working for the assimilation of Mexicans to American Protestant cultural values and norms. As Machado has noted in regard to the activities of other Christian denominations in the Borderlands, “Christianization meant Americanization” (72). The main activity of Atkinson was in Sonora, but she had much influence on the Arizona side of the border as well. Many of her early converts and colleagues helped to found new churches on the American side of the border. In fact, María Atkinson can be seen as a principal conduit of Appalachian culture to the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.<sup>5</sup>

[38] The Church of God is a Pentecostal denomination that is now headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee.<sup>6</sup> Its origins are in the mountainous borders of Tennessee and North Carolina. The church was established after about two decades of meetings among groups who originally belonged to Baptist, Methodist, Quaker and other denominations. Early leaders included William F. Bryant, Richard Spurling, and Ambrose J. Tomlinson. By 1906, some of these groups held a general Assembly, and, in 1907, the name “Church of God” was chosen for these congregations.

[39] The Church of God was primarily rooted in Methodist theology, as were other similar “holiness” and “Pentecostal” denominations (see Dayton; Synan). The denomination classified itself with other “holiness” churches insofar as it advocated the doctrine of “sanctification,” the idea that one could achieve moral perfection in this life. The distinctive aspect of the Church of God, as a Pentecostal church, was its insistence that the speaking of tongues was the initial sign of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, an event which empowered the believer to execute the Christian mission. Contrary to the idea in most other Protestant denominations, Holy Spirit

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<sup>5</sup> The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, as a distinct socio-geographic entity, was a concept developed by Herbert Eugene Bolton. For our purposes, we concentrate on the Arizona-Sonora portion of this geographical unit. For discussions of Borderland studies, see Bannon; Hill; Machado; and Martinez. For discussion of the Church of God’s missionary efforts in the American Southwest prior to María Atkinson, see Conn (133-34).

<sup>6</sup> The discussion of the early history of the Church of God is indebted to Conn; McCauley (276-310); and Hollenweger (1972: 47-62).



Baptism was viewed as an event that was often subsequent to salvation instead of synchronous with salvation.

[40] Although the Pentecostal movement had many foci outside of the Appalachian mountains (see Synan), it was Appalachian traditions that most permeated the Church of God's version of Pentecostalism. Accordingly, Atkinson's interaction with the leadership of the Church of God and its missionaries resulted in a most influential transfer of Appalachian culture to northern Mexico. Indeed, Atkinson helped to transmit many customs and ideas derived from Appalachia and the American south to Mexican converts in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.

[41] The Church of God has made no secret of its pride in its Appalachian heritage, and some of its leaders expressly note the dissemination of these Appalachian roots. Deborah McCauley notes:

One faculty member at the Church of God School of Theology, the denomination's seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee, has called the Church of God "Appalachia for export," stating that Church of God ministers native to the mountain regions of Appalachia have very specific ideas about appropriate worship practices and religious traditions that are more characteristic of Appalachia than they are of the Holiness-Pentecostal movements generally (277).

[42] Part of this link between northern Mexico and Appalachia was formed by James H. Ingram (b. 1893), who was raised in the mountains of Kentucky and West Virginia. Ingram served as overseer of the Church of God in Mexico from 1932 to 1943 (Hargrave: 136; see also Dominguez: 2.181-89). Another significant figure was Vessie Hargrave (1915-1987), who served as superintendent of Latin America for many years beginning in the 1940s (see Rivera; Moree). Although a Texan by birth, Hargrave worked closely with Atkinson in advising her on how to conduct services based on the church's traditions, which derived from Appalachia. In 1932 Atkinson visited Tennessee, where she was undoubtedly exposed to the culture and forms of worship of the area.

[43] According to McCauley, one of the nearly universal characteristics of Appalachian mountain worship services is "inviting people in need - be they sinners, backsliders, or burdened in their hearts - to come up and be prayed for" (85).<sup>7</sup> Atkinson regularly used this technique in her services. Calling people to the altar is confirmed by Ramos and Felix as well as by numerous photographs showing persons being prayed for at the altar. In a transcript of her conversion testimony, for example, Ramoncita Montoya reports that her initial visit to Atkinson's service in Obregón, Sonora around 1939 involved coming forward during the "altar service." Likewise, the practice of members reciting their testimony during services, which was a common practice in some of the Appalachian churches, was continued by Atkinson in her Mexican churches.

[44] The schedule of services also followed the traditions established in Appalachia by the Church of God. Midweek services were not common among most modern Protestant churches. Conn, the Church of God historian, specifically observes: "With the increase in modernism in the nominal churches, there had been a corresponding decrease of midweek prayer services" (65). The Church of God, however, attempted to restore midweek services. Likewise, the Church of God in Mexico established midweek services as a regular practice.

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<sup>7</sup> Leonard also seems to see the altar call as a new development in Appalachia and the South (xxix).

[45] Another Appalachian tradition that may have been adapted by Atkinson and her followers concerns baptism. McCauley notes: “Mountain people today, universally, continue to place great importance on baptism by immersion ‘in living waters,’ an extremely common expression meaning out-of-doors in a natural setting; indeed most cannot imagine any other form of baptism acceptable” (87). Likewise, many of the baptisms in the nascent Mexican church of God were performed in outdoor settings. Numerous photographs of baptism outdoors in *El Evangelio* confirm this practice. Luciano Ramos also reports that they held outdoor baptisms even though they were not the most convenient in some of the settings in Mexico. In fact, such baptisms outdoors were performed even during the time that baptism was outlawed by local law. Such reports indicate that the influence of a typical baptismal mode in Appalachia took precedence over convenience and local law in Mexico.

[46] The dominance of Anglo musical norms has been discussed by Hispanics in the Church of God. Angelo Corbo, a noted musician in the Church of God, for example, states: “Traditionally it has been accepted as ‘our music’ versions of Anglo-American hymns and songs that missionaries taught prior to their sermons” (12).<sup>8</sup> What is overlooked is that such Anglo-American music in the Church of God was principally from Appalachia and the South. Vessie Hargrave, who was a primary liaison between Appalachia and Mexico, mentions hymn books as part of his equipment on his visits to Mexico. As was the case in much of white southern culture, music with African-American roots (e.g. rhythm and blues, rock-and-roll) was strongly denounced. Likewise, María Atkinson taught the hymns in the books imported by Hargrave, and she denounced many types of music with an African-American influence.

[47] McCauley warns readers not to overlay the rural or anti-urban sentiments of Appalachian mountain culture. Yet, there are strong indications that Appalachian anti-urban and anti-modernist traditions were quite strong in the Church of God. This anti-urbanism is acknowledged by Mickey Crews in his recent social history of that denomination: “The attack on urban middle-class churches was only one component of the Church of God’s larger assault on the city and the new middle-class values associated with it” (14). Indeed, most of the leadership and laity of the Church of God during Atkinson’s early ministry in the 1930s and 1940s were impoverished and poorly-educated inhabitants of rural Appalachia. Liston Pope, the famous sociologist of American religion, noted that, in the cotton mills of North Carolina in 1939, “Presbyterian workers feel superior to those belonging to the Methodist and Baptist churches, while members of the latter two denominations regard themselves as definitely higher in the social scale than Wesleyan Methodists. All, in turn, despise the Church of God and deprecate the social status of its members” (138).

[48] Church of God leaders, however, seemed to resist any effort to be overwhelmed or patronized by wealthier or modernized lifestyles. According to Conn, William F. Bryant, one of the most influential of the early Church leaders, expresses his distaste for the city as follows: “I love the mountains because I am a mountain boy. When I look out of my window in the city and see nothing but other people’s back yards, and then let my mind wander back to the hills as it were in praise of the Almighty . . . my heart seems to ache with an inexpressible hunger to once more be there” (79). The maintenance of simple dress styles that were common in Appalachia may have been at the root of a rule, added to the Church’s doctrinal statement in 1915, “against

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<sup>8</sup> My translation of the Spanish: “Tradicionalmente se ha aceptado como ‘nuestra musica’ las traducciones de himnos y canciones anglo-americanos que los misioneros enseñaban a cantar antes de sus sermones.”

members wearing gold for ornament or decoration, such as finger rings, bracelets, earrings, lockets, etc.” (Conn: 120). Likewise, Richard Spurling, another early Church of God leader, spoke of the aversion toward any sort of cosmetic ostentation in favor of developing “the inward man” (McCauley: 301). Such traditions, though not necessarily confined to Appalachia (see Synan), may have been intended to counteract any diminution in self-esteem among members who could not afford to dress in the more expensive fashion of “urban civilization.” If everyone was going to be equal, then leveling attire would be a good way to achieve this.

[49] María Atkinson, following such Church of God doctrines, definitely judged attire as a principal reflection of holiness. The wearing of jewelry or cosmetics was vehemently denounced by Atkinson, according to informants. Such resistance toward jewelry and urban fashion was not common in the Catholic traditions of Sonora, but rather another example of the assimilation of traditions transmitted by Atkinson from the Appalachian leaders of the church.

[50] The origin of Atkinson’s personal dress style, which itself was quite unusual, is still a matter of debate. She usually wore all-white long dresses. Some members of the Church of God cite Ecclesiastes 9:8, which encourages the wearing of “white,” as the source of her practice. This white attire was eventually the color of the uniforms of many of the women’s groups in the Hispanic Church of God on both sides of the border. Interestingly, this white attire was also used by Aimee Semple McPherson, the noted Canadian-American Pentecostal founder of the Four Square Gospel denomination.

[51] Anti-tobacco sentiments were also brought from the Appalachian churches. Charles Conn notes that in Appalachia the “use of tobacco was an accepted part of most personal and social life,” and cites specifically the anti-tobacco lead assumed by the Church of God (66). While the Methodist church had long discouraged the use of tobacco by its preachers, there was no corresponding prohibition with the laity (for a history of anti-smoking movements, see Kluger: especially 15-16, 39). In the Minutes of the 1906 General Assembly of the Church of God held in Camp Creek, North Carolina, there was specific discussion of the reasons for the anti-tobacco stance, including the harmful effects of tobacco on health, and specifically the “nervous system.” Just as important, tobacco, was judged to be a “useless expense, the money for which ought to be used to clothe the poor, spread the gospel or make the homes of our country more comfortable” (Minutes, 5). Such comments in the Church of God Minutes perhaps were prompted, in part, by the fact that Congress raised the taxes on cigarettes by 200 percent in 1898. Kluger notes that such taxes posed “a considerable disincentive to the poorest buyers” (39). Thus, the efforts to combat the poverty of rural Appalachia clearly contributed to these anti-tobacco sentiments.

[52] Such an anti-tobacco stance was brought directly into the Church of God in Northern Mexico from Appalachia. Luciano Ramos, for example, indicates that tobacco was strongly denounced by Atkinson and the Church of God missionaries in Mexico. The distinctiveness of the Church of God tradition is evident insofar as no such prohibition against tobacco was known in the Catholic tradition or in most other Protestant denominations of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.

[53] There were other traditions that also seem to be Appalachian exports to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Some of the social and religious traditions of Appalachia soon became not just beneficial customs, but matters of fundamental doctrine. This was the case with most forms of public entertainment, such as movies, which were strictly prohibited. This again apparently reflected the values of Appalachian or southern rural culture rather than urban American culture.

[54] But the Church of God's diffusion out of Appalachia was, in fact, part of a broader trend. In the decades prior to Atkinson's ministry, there had been a discernible shift in the regional origin of American missionaries to Mexico. In 1880, for example, one survey reports no American missionaries were born in the American southeast,<sup>9</sup> but by 1910 18.8% of missionaries were from that same region (Baldwin: 163). At the same time the percentage of missionaries from the Northeast fell from 50% in 1888 to 11% in 1910. In sum, the Church of God's missionary activities in the 1930s and 1940s, and their resulting cultural transmissions, were part of an increased "southernization" of the pool of American missionaries to Latin America.

### **Relations with the American Overseers**

[55] The relationship between María Atkinson and denominational superiors indicates the extent to which Americanization was at work. Interaction between Atkinson and the headquarters in Tennessee reveals that there was a sense of cultural superiority in the American missionaries. For example, Vessie Hargrave, a primary overseer of Mexico during part of Atkinson's ministry, described her as "submissive to the rule of those whom God had placed in positions of leadership" (Humphrey: 121). At that time, those in positions of leadership were mostly Euroamericans. Her letters also evidence her eagerness to please her Euroamerican superiors, often including reports of all the good work she is doing (letters to Cleveland, dated June 5, 1947 and May 28, 1938).

[56] The idea that Mexico and the rest of Latin America were inhabited by a spiritually inferior population is reflected in a Church of God Mission Board statement: "Religious ritual of centuries has engrossed an otherwise outstanding people in unprecedented superstitious worship" (4). A similar sentiment is expressed in one of the theological manuals used by the Church of God: "The settlement of America by Protestant immigrants saved it from the fate of South America and thereby saved the world for democracy" (Pearlman: 43). Vessie Hargrave stated that Atkinson's "goal in life was to see Mexico saved from superstition and idolatry" (Humphrey: foreword).

[57] Such attitudes toward Mexico did not differ much from what is found in more frankly ethnocentric writings of other Americans. Thus, in *Two Years Before the Mast*, a widely-read portrait of the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Mexican-controlled California published in 1834, Richard Henry Dana said: "In the hands of an enterprising people, what a country this might be" (Limerick: 241-42). Likewise, Marshall Everett, a journalist who wrote specifically about the Mexican Revolution of 1910, describes the Indian religious heritage of Mexicans as follows:

Certainly the substitution of Roman Catholicism for their former idolatry, among so many of the tribes has not caused them to renounce their former superstitions, because the religious ideas of the Indians are found by present day travelers to be exceedingly vague. They set up idols on the altars in their modern temples and in any severe stress revert to their ancient beliefs and practices (238).

In other passages, Everett specifically says that "the average Mexican is quite a different thing from a civilized man, and that is what the American people have been unable to comprehend" (296-97).

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<sup>9</sup> The survey defined the "Southeast" as consisting of the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida.

[58] Part of María Atkinson's mission, as expressed in her activities and letters, was to elevate Mexican culture to the same level as American Protestant culture, especially among the "indios" like Uriel Felix. Although the early American leaders of the Church of God saw themselves in the lower economic echelons of American culture, Atkinson perceived those same leaders as members of the middle class relative to the majority of her Mexican constituents. Elliott notes her behavior in conferences meant to educate her flock: "At these conferences she would also discuss their personal appearance. They were encouraged to move toward middle-class standards of dress in order to give their position more respectability" (112).

[59] Thus, Atkinson may be seen as a religious version of the local representative of the American companies that were well-known in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. These officials were to instruct the Mexicans on how to behave properly and become part of the company "family." Her own Americanization is also seen in the use of "Mary" instead of her native María in signing her letters, beginning at least in the late 1930s (e.g. letters to Cleveland, dated June 5, 1947 and May 28, 1938).

[60] Americanizing mechanisms were explicit in a number of formal agreements made with Mexican congregations joining the Church of God. Thus, in one document, signed on June 13, 1943, a Mexican group of churches led by David Ruesga, one of Atkinson's early collaborators, agrees as follows:

The work of the Church of God will from now on be under the direction of the Mission Board of the Church of God in the United States and the Overseer of Mexico and the Assistant Overseer of Mexico being all the ministers in Mexico thus obliged to cooperate and help the missionaries sent by the Church of God to the better development of their ministries. . . . David Ruesga, representative of the party of the second part agrees that he is ready to receive instruction from the Mission Board in the United States . . . agrees to regulate the tithing system and offerings in the same way as the Church [of God] does in the United States (Hargrave: 129-131).

[61] Many ministers subsequently left the Church of God to form more independent churches governed by indigenous ministers. The Iglesia Cristiana Independiente Pentecostés (Independent Christian Pentecostal Church) and other Pentecostal Mexican congregations also prided themselves on being governed by Mexicans from the beginning (Hollenweger 1997: 89). Atkinson, however, always remained loyal to her American denomination.

[62] In many ways, Atkinson occupied an intermediate position in the hierarchy of the Church of God at least through the early 1940s. On the one hand, Atkinson was sufficiently removed from Tennessee to exercise power almost independently over her local congregations. On the other hand, in order to succeed in her mission, she needed the help and support of her American sponsors, whom she genuinely admired as bearers of a superior culture and mode of life. After the late 1940s, when Mexican male supervisors were established over Mexican churches, she lost most of her power.

## **Conclusion**

[63] María Atkinson's vision of a better Mexico involved, intentionally or unintentionally, the Americanization of Mexico. She thought that Catholicism was mere idolatry and superstition,

and that American-born Pentecostalism was the antidote. Although many worship practices that she promoted were common in non-Appalachian settings, the particular configuration that she adapted for Mexico was most predominant in Appalachia and the American southeast. These practices were spread by many of her early converts and colleagues who founded churches in America, and so she is largely responsible for the rise of Appalachian religious traditions in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands. Indeed, by the late 1940s many of the customs that she helped to initiate in Sonora were common in Hispanic Churches of God throughout the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands and beyond.

[64] Atkinson's career and the subsequent role of women in the church confirms much of the thesis of Barfoot and Sheppard. Atkinson's ability to exercise power in what would otherwise be deemed to be a patriarchal culture was due most probably to her social class and educational level relative to those of most of the male converts in her church. She was relatively highly-educated, and she spoke English. Most of her initial male converts were poorly-educated Indian or Mestizo laborers.

[65] However, when the educational level of the converts increased, she and other women soon found themselves at a disadvantage in attaining any higher leadership roles. Equally- or lesser-educated males such as Uriel Felix and Luciano Ramos would eventually be placed in leadership positions even by Atkinson. In general, this followed the trend towards a decrease in women ministers in the denomination (Crews: 106).

[66] The apogee of Atkinson's power was in the late 1930s and early 1940s. After that, she became mostly a revered "mother" who had a diminished role in the decisions made about churches in Mexico. Many of the worship practices and dress codes favored by Atkinson have been relaxed or altered in the last two decades. Yet, her influence can still be seen in the educational institutions she helped to found in Mexico. She also helped, through a relatively systematic promotional campaign, to consolidate the notion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands that Pentecostalism offered an alternative health care system.

[67] Although Atkinson served as a role model for many women, it is clear that her stellar success was due to the unique mix of her personality with social and historical circumstances that have largely disappeared. Yet, Atkinson's ministry and influence should prompt us to explore further the complex socio-historical and personal factors that lead to the acceptance of women leaders in otherwise male-oriented Pentecostal traditions in Mexico and elsewhere. As such, Atkinson forms an important chapter in the study of religion and society of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands.

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