

Changing Religious Practices in Latin America and the Caribbean

One of the main objectives of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism in Latin America and the Caribbean was the conversion of indigenous peoples to Catholicism. While some indigenous people fiercely resisted missionary efforts, others found ways to blend their own traditions with those of the Roman Catholic Church. The process of conversion was facilitated by the reported appearance of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe to an Indian convert in Mexico on December 9, 1531, leaving behind her brown-skinned image on his mantle, and by the efforts of some priests to protect local communities from the Spanish government's efforts to obtain land, tribute, and labor by force.

The slave trade brought African religious traditions to Latin America and the Caribbean, and these eventually merged with indigenous and Catholic beliefs to form Candomble and Umbanda in Brazil, Voodoo in Haiti, and Santería in Cuba and other islands (Figure 5.D). Candomble and Umbanda are both sects of Santería, with rituals that involve dances, offerings of candles and flowers, sacrifice of animals such as chickens, and mediums and priests who use trances to communicate with spirits that include several Catholic saints. Voodoo (also spelled Voudou, Voudun, and Voudoun) rituals include *drumming, prayer, and animal sacrifice* to important spirits based on traditional African gods and Catholic saints and are led by priests who act as healers and protectors against witchcraft. Santería is closely connected to the Yoruba religion of West Africa and blends saints with African spirits associated with nature, using rituals similar to other Latin American religions.

In the 1970s liberation theology emerged, a new form of Catholic practice that focused on the poor and disadvantaged. It was informed by the perceived preference of Jesus for the poor and helpless and by the writings of Karl Marx and other revolutionaries on



Figure 5.D Santería altar This altar in Brazil illustrates how Santería combines animistic elements with Catholic religious symbols.

inequality and oppression. This new orientation to the poor was espoused by the Second Vatican Council, called by Pope John XXIII in 1962. Priests preached grassroots self-help to organized Christian-based communities and often spoke out against repression and authoritarianism. Some were murdered by powerful interests who saw liberation theology as revolutionary and communistic. For example, Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador was shot to death while saying Mass on March 24, 1980.

In recent decades evangelical Protestant groups with fundamentalist Christian beliefs have grown and spread rapidly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Figure 5.E shows the current distribution of these groups. Their message of literacy, education, sobriety, frugality, and personal salvation has become very popular in many rural areas. The conversion of Latin Americans to Protestant faiths grows stronger each year. Today over 15 percent of Latin Americans belong to evangelical churches, with the Latin American Catholic Bishops Conference claiming that 8,000 Latin Americans convert to evangelical Christianity every day. In Brazil, where Evangelical Protestantism is sec-

ond only to Catholicism in terms of number of adherents, half a million Catholics leave the church per year. In Mexico, there has been a 10 percent decline in the Catholic population since the mid-twentieth century. Observers of evangelical missionizing in Latin America believe that fundamentalist missionaries and ministers are younger and more numerous than Catholic priests and therefore provide a higher minister-to-worshiper ratio than the Catholic priest-to-worshiper ratio. For example, in Mexico, each evangelical pastor serves 230, while each priest serves 8,600. Evangelical churches may also be more involved in indigenous communities than the Catholic churches.

There is also a strong thread of anti-clericalism in many Latin American countries. This partly originated as a reaction to the authority given by the Pope to the Spanish crown, the control of land and labor by the missions, and the Catholic Church's alliance with the landowners and political leaders in colonial and post-independence conservative administrations. After the Mexican Revolution, for example, there was for many years a strict separation of Church and state, with priests forbidden to wear their clerical garb on the street.

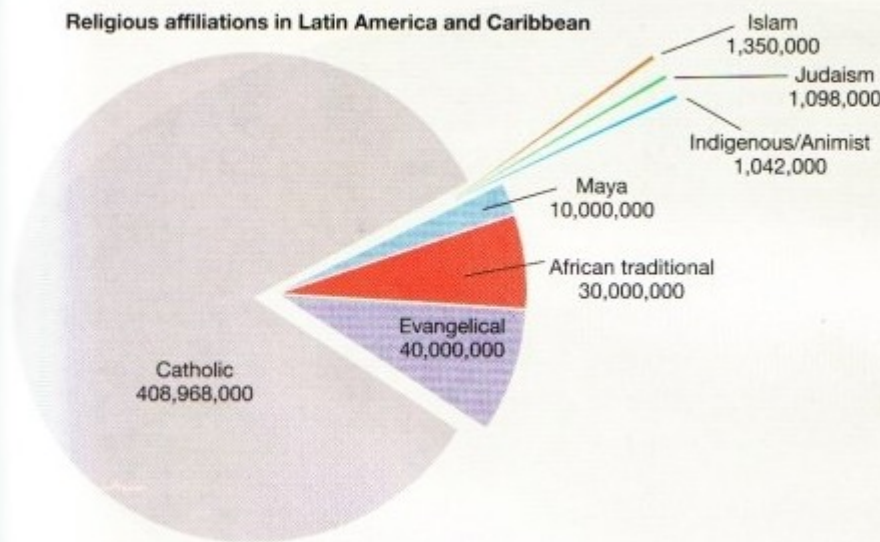


Figure 5.E Latin America and Caribbean religions Although the majority of Latin Americans are Catholic, evangelical and African traditional religions, such as Santería, are also important to millions of people.