

Latin America

By *Austen Ivereigh*

Latin America and the Caribbean is arguably the most vibrantly Christian continent on earth, containing nearly half of the world's Catholics as well as a rapidly expanding evangelical population. In Portuguese-speaking Brazil and Spanish-speaking Latin America -- nations with a shared Iberian colonial past -- anywhere between 60 and 90 per cent of the population describes themselves as Catholic, and the Catholic Church has a special status in many of the republican constitutions of those nations. But the story is very different in smaller nations, especially in the Caribbean, where Protestant Churches dominate the English-speaking islands.

There is also greater religious diversity in the Iberian nations than many assume, the fruit of Latin America's insertion into the global economy in the nineteenth century. Hence the large numbers, in Cuba and Brazil, of those practising Spiritism (in Cuba, *santería*), a mélange of beliefs underpinned by the animism of African slaves brought by the Spanish and Portuguese to work on the sugar and coffee plantations. Large-scale early-twentieth-century immigration to Argentina (as well as Chile, Uruguay, Colombia and Venezuela) also left its mark: the Jewish population in Buenos Aires, for example, is around 200,000, and the city has a dozen synagogues. And while most of Argentina's million-strong population of descendants of Syrians and Lebanese are Christian, there are over 100,000 Muslims in Argentina and perhaps 35,000 in Brazil.

After independence from Spain and Portugal in the nineteenth century, when Latin America became a series of self-governing republics, a common pattern in the constitutions was to introduce religious freedom or at least freedom of worship, while the state asserted its control over the Church, and in many cases made Catholicism the official religion. In some countries the state subsidised the Church, a legacy which persists to today: Argentine bishops, for example, are paid by the state, and in Haiti, where Catholicism is no longer the official religion, Catholic clergy receive a public stipend not available to ministers of other faiths.

Yet elsewhere - notably in Mexico and Colombia -- the state's attitude towards the Church varied according to whether liberals or conservatives were in power: the liberals sought to reduce the power of the Church, conservatives saw it as a bulwark of the social order. Mexico was the most extreme example of the first: the revolutionary Constitution of 1917 expropriated all church property, outlawed church schools, and prevented wearing of clerical garb, and in the 1920s, an uprising of peasants and clergy against the Mexican government led to the persecution and state killing of Catholic priests. Yet in the same decade, Church and state amicably separated in Chile, whose constitution protects freedom of conscience and the free exercise of all religions that do not oppose morality, good customs or public order.

Following the lead of Europe and North America, commitment to religious freedom spread in Latin America after the Second World War, especially among Christian-Democratic parties and movements, a process facilitated by the Catholic Church renouncing any claim to special privileges at the Second Vatican Council. However, in the 1960s-70s, when Marxist strains of liberation theology led to the Church dividing along political lines, some church hierarchies continued to cling to authoritarian politics as a defence against the perceived threat of communism. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of poor Latin Americans were drawn to evangelical and Pentecostal churches: Brazil, for example, is now more than 20 per cent evangelical, while in some Central-American states a third of the population describes themselves as Protestant.

In general, the evangelical churches have full freedom of worship and expression both in law and practice. Where restrictions exist, they are usually the result of officially secularist and atheist regimes, and apply equally to the Catholic Church. Thus, in Mexico, where the severest legal restrictions on the Churches were lifted in 1992, Churches continue to be prevented from broadcasting, or organizing religious acts without government permission; and church leaders of whatever denomination who speak out on political and social issues are reminded by the government that Mexico is officially secular and that religion is a private matter. So, too, in Cuba, where the communist state continues severely to restrict freedom of religion, even if it allows freedom of worship; although the restrictions on the Church are no different from those faced by all non-state actors, their effect is felt keenly, because the Church remains the most important actor in civil society.

Under the populist authoritarian regime in Venezuela, meanwhile, official hostility to religion has led to complaints by Catholic bishops of expropriations, harassment, electronic surveillance (most notably, phone tapping), and debarring priests from hospitals and prisons. Over the Andes in Ecuador, the like-minded left-wing government of Rafael Correa has been accused of purging Catholic chaplains from prisons and removing crucifixes from hospitals.

Even where religious freedom exists in both law and practice, minorities can face intolerance, and sometimes violence, as in Brazil, where practitioners of syncretistic beliefs such as Umbanda and candomblé report being attacked by evangelicals accusing them of devil worship.

Religious freedom needs to develop in Latin America in three main ways: in the lifting of remaining sanctions, both legal and unofficial, on religious bodies; greater co-operation between the faiths, notably between evangelicals and Catholics, allowing for action together on issues of common concern; and in greater acceptance by the region's governments of the religious voice in national life. The election of an Argentine pope in March 2013, who as cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires pioneered a unique model of interreligious dialogue and collaboration, can have only a positive effect in all three areas.

Note

This analysis forms part of Aid to the Church in Need's *Religious Freedom in the World Report – 2014*. To view the report in full please visit: www.religion-freedom-report.org