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**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
RELIGION IN PARAGUAY**

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Religion in Paraguay

Country Summary

Paraguay is a landlocked South American country, about the size of California, and surrounded by Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil. Its 406,752 square miles of territory is home to an estimated 6,163,913 people (2008), almost all of mixed Spanish and Amerindian heritage. East of the Paraguay River there are grassy plains, wooded hills and tropical forests; west of the Paraguay River (Chaco region) the terrain is low, flat and marshy plain.

The nation is divided administratively into 18 provinces, with the City of Asunción in the Central Province as its capital (pop. 512,000 in 2002); however, the Greater Asunción Metro Area had a population of 1,659,500 in 2002. Other large cities include: Ciudad del Este (212,000), San Lorenzo (204,000), Luque (171,000), Capiatá (154,000), and Fernando de la Moya (114,000).

Today, Paraguay is a nation of *mestizos* (about 95 percent), a result of the interbreeding of Amerindians with Spanish colonists and later immigrants from Argentina, Brazil and Europe, mainly Swiss-Italians and Germans. Spanish and Guaraní are the national languages, with the latter being dominant: about 75 percent of Paraguayans speak Spanish (the language of business and government) and 90 percent speak Guaraní. Spanish is dominant in the capital city of Asunción and surrounding areas, while Guaraní is dominant in the interior. Also, German is still spoken among many Lutherans and Mennonites.

Paraguay is a developing country that ranked as the second-poorest country in South America in 2007. Paraguay has a market economy marked by a large informal sector that features both re-export of imported consumer goods to neighboring countries, and thousands of small business enterprises. Paraguay's largest economic activity is based on agriculture, agribusiness and cattle ranching.

Paraguay allows foreign land ownership of any size. Only nationals of Brazil, Argentina and Bolivia cannot own land in specific frontier regions. Land purchases by foreigners, attracted by low land prices, have for long been a feature of the Paraguayan economy. A large percentage of the population derives its living from agricultural activity, often at a subsistence level. Despite difficulties arising from political instability, corruption and slow infrastructural reforms, Paraguay has been a member of the MERCOSUR free trade bloc, participating since 1991 as one its founding members.



Historically, Paraguay's economic potential has been constrained by its landlocked geography, but it does have access to the Atlantic Ocean via the Paraná River. Because it is landlocked, Paraguay's economy is very dependent on Brazil and Argentina, its major trade partners. Roughly 38 percent of Paraguay's GDP is derived from trade and exports to Brazil and Argentina. Paraguay, through various treaties, has been granted free ports in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil through which its products are exported and imports are channeled.

Paraguay has a serious problem with poverty and inequality. According to government sources, approximately 2.1 million people (about 35 percent of its total population) are considered to be poor. In rural areas, 41 percent of the people lack an adequate monthly income to cover their basic necessities, whereas in urban areas the poverty level is estimated at 27.6 percent. The top 10 percent of the population earns 43.8 percent of the national income, while the lowest 10 percent has less than 1.0 percent. The economic recession has worsened income inequality, notably in the rural areas.

Similarly, land concentration in the countryside is one of the highest worldwide: 10 percent of the population controls 66 percent of the land, while 30 percent of the rural people are landless peasants. This inequality has caused a great deal of social and political tension between the landless and socio-economic elite who control the nation's business, industry and government.

Current Religious Situation

Religious affiliation in Paraguay today (2002 census) is dominated by the Roman Catholic Church (89.6 percent), with only a small representation of other religious groups: Protestants (6.2 percent), other religions (2.1 percent), none or undesignated (2.1 percent). However, a 2006 survey indicated that 84.7 percent of respondents considered themselves Catholic, which is a decrease of five percentage points from 2002.

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, it occasionally failed to enforce religious freedom laws when abuses occurred.

From the 1870s to the present, Paraguay has experienced considerable social progress, mainly due to the arrival of waves of immigrants from Argentina, Italy, Germany, France, Spain (about 40,000), who developed the livestock, agriculture and forestry industries; the Middle East, and North America. The immigrants included about 5,000 Mennonites from Europe and North America who created agricultural colonies, schools and small businesses.

Some of these early immigrants were members of Protestant congregations before their arrival in Paraguay: German Lutherans, German and French Calvinists, as well as German-Russian Mennonites during the early twentieth century. During the 1930s and after World War II, Japanese Shinto and Buddhist immigrants arrived and settled in agricultural colonies near Asunción and Encarnación; by the 1980s, there were about 8,000 Japanese immigrants in these agricultural colonies. In the early 1970s, thousands of Brazilians began migrating to Paraguay,

mainly because of the availability of cheap land; and, by the early 1990s, an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 Brazilians lived in the eastern border region.

Also during the 1970s, an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 immigrants (mainly Buddhists) from Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan began arriving in Paraguay. Many of these immigrant groups brought their own religious traditions with them, thereby enriching the religious diversity of Paraguay.

Overview of Social, Political and Religious Development

Before the arrival of Europeans, three aboriginal peoples dominated the Paraguay River valley, which divides the territory into two regions. Upriver, the Guaraní were a settled agricultural people. Downriver, in what is termed the Chaco region, the more nomadic Guaycurús and Payaguás were hunters, gatherers and fishers. Three other Amerindian groups, united by language, were differentiated into more than one hundred subgroups.

The Spanish entered the region by following the tributaries of the large Río de la Plata, looking for mineral resources. Spanish conquistador Juan de Salazar and his company of soldiers and colonists founded Fort Asunción in 1537 as part of a campaign to colonize and subdue an estimated 200,000 Amerindians, principally the Tupi-Guaraní. That fort would grow into the present-day capital of Paraguay, Asunción.

The purpose of the pacification of the Amerindians was to provide the Spanish colonists with a source of cheap labor for agricultural and commercial development. Within 20 years of its founding, Asunción boasted a Spanish population of 1,500, a Roman Catholic cathedral, a textile mill and the beginning of the livestock industry. For more than two centuries, Asunción was a principal center of Spanish power in the Río de la Plata basin, and from Asunción the conquistadors launched expeditions to dominate and colonize the surrounding territories.

The early Spanish colonists failed to recognize the relative agricultural value of the region, and as a result the Amerindians suffered somewhat less than in other countries under Spanish control, at least in the beginning. However, in the late 18th century, many Amerindians were forced to become laborers on the developing cattle ranches and plantations. In 1811, the Spanish governor in Asunción was forced out when the region's planters demanded a free trade policy for their tea and tobacco. Officials of the new republican government established a relatively isolated position in an attempt to escape the chaos they saw in the surrounding Southern Cone countries.

In 1811, Paraguay declared its independence from Spain and from the newly-independent government in Buenos Aires. However, the country's first president, **Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia**, established a cruel dictatorship that lasted from 1811 to 1840. Many Spaniards who were the owners of the best lands and businesses were jailed, murdered or exiled, along with others who criticized his rule. Nevertheless, during this period, the nation prospered due to the hard work of its people and improved methods of agricultural and livestock production.

When Rodríguez de Francia died in 1840, the nation experienced six-months of disorder until **Carlos Antonio López** came to power and ruled despotically from 1841 to 1862. Carlos

Antonio López died in 1862 and was followed in power by his 35-year-old son, **Francisco Solano López**, who ruled until 1870. The second López was responsible for plunging his weak nation into a savage and bloody war with the combined military forces of Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. In the disastrous **War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870)**, about two-thirds of Paraguay's adult males were killed and much of its territory (160,000 sq km) was lost to the victors. The country was politically and economically crippled for the next half century.

The country's isolationist policy worked for about two generations (1811-1865) but Paraguay had been involved for years in boundary and tariff disputes with its more powerful neighbors, Argentina and Brazil. The people of Uruguay also had struggled to achieve and maintain their independence from those same powers, especially from Argentina. In 1864, the government of Brazil helped the leader of Uruguay's Colorado Party to oust his major opponent, whereupon the military dictator of Paraguay, **Francisco Solano López**, declared war on Brazil, believing that the regional balance of power was threatened. Paraguay's Army numbered about 50,000 men, which was the strongest military force in Latin America at that time. López' action was viewed by many as aggression for self- and national aggrandizement but, as the war wore on, many viewed this as a war of conquest by Argentina. At that time, Paraguay's population was only about 450,000.

In response to López' declaration of war, the governments of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay created a political and military alliance, backed by England, against Paraguay that led to the bloodiest conflict in Latin American history to date. The five-year **War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870)** led to the death of 60 to 80 percent of the Guaraní people, and Paraguay lost almost half of its national territory. All the males who survived were sold into slavery. Those Amerindian groups in the more remote areas suffered fewer ill effects from the war, but to this day women greatly outnumber men in the entire country. As a result, family instability has contributed to the country's lack of stability overall. The nation's economy was destroyed and 160,000 square kilometers of territory were lost.

The Colorado Party (officially, the National Republican Association - ARN), nationalistic and ultra-conservative, was founded in 1887 by **General Bernardino Caballero Melgarejo** (1839-1912), a descendant from Spanish nobility who fought in the War of the Triple Alliance and served as president of Paraguay from 1881 to 1886. He was the virtual ruler of the country from 1887 until 1904. After Gen. Caballero rigged the 1886 election to ensure the victory Patricio Escobar, his chosen candidate, his political opponents in response founded the **Paraguayan Liberal Party**; and he then founded the Colorado Party as a counter measure. Out of office, Gen. Caballero maintained a large degree of political control as Commander of the Army. Since then, the Colorados and the Liberals have been competing for dominance of the country.

The **Paraguayan Liberal Party** dominated the government from 1904 until 1936 (and again briefly during 1939 and 1940), when it lost power largely due to the disastrous results of the **Chaco War** (1932-1935, fought over control of the Chaco region's national resources), in which Paraguay defeated Bolivia at great cost. There were an estimated 100,000 casualties, of which more died from diseases (such as malaria and other infections) than from the actual fighting; about 57,000 of the total casualties were Bolivian. At the same time, the war brought both countries to the brink of economic disaster. Since then, the Liberal Party has never recovered dominance, and the Colorado Party held power through military dictatorships until 1989, most

notably the regime of **Gen. Alfredo Stroessner Mattiauda**, which lasted from 1954 to 1989 and largely crushed all opposition. By the end of the Stroessner regime the Liberal Party no longer existed but its political successor, the **Authentic Radical Liberal Party (PLRA)**, currently is the second-largest political party in the country.

From 1947 until 1962, the Colorado Party ruled Paraguay as a one-party state; all other political parties were declared illegal. Finally, after sixty-one years in power, it was defeated in national elections held in April 2008. The Colorado Party lost the presidential elections to an opposition candidate from the center-left, **Fernando Lugo Méndez** (a former Roman Catholic bishop). This was a first on two accounts: the free election of an opposition candidate and of a Catholic bishop to the office of President of Paraguay.

The decades of poverty and instability led the way to the emergence in 1954 of **General Alfredo Stroessner Matiauda** (1912-2006), a Paraguayan military officer who created a brutal dictatorship that lasted from 1954 to 1989. His regime was the longest dictatorship of the 20th century, only surpassed by that of Fidel Castro who ruled Cuba from 1959 to 2008. Between 1960 and 1980, an estimated one million Paraguayans migrated to Argentina to find work and to improve their lives. **Stroessner** himself was overthrown in a coup led by **General Andrés Rodríguez Pedotti** (1923-1997) in 1989, which resulted in an opening for democracy.

Some observers maintain that opposition from the Catholic bishops is the only reason that Gen. Stroessner did not have absolute control over the country. After the destruction of Asunción University in 1972 by the police, **Archbishop of Asunción Ismael Rolón Silvero** excommunicated the Minister of the Interior and the Chief of Police, and prohibited the celebration of the Mass as a sign of protest against the brutal Stroessner regime. When **Pope John Paul II** visited Paraguay in 1988, his presence and message bolstered what was already a robust anti-Stroessner movement within the country.

Paraguayans are divided about the legacy of the Stroessner dictatorship. Many citizens grew to oppose his corrupt, authoritarian and repressive rule, while others defend his legacy as providing political stability and economic progress, despite the serious violations of human rights that occurred during his regime, in particular the infamous Operation Condor.

Operation Condor was an official, organized and secret campaign of political repression against alleged leftist dissidents conducted during 1975 and 1976 jointly by the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, with the collaboration of the U.S. government through its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In 1992, new information about Operation Condor was disclosed by José Fernández, a Paraguayan judge, who inadvertently discovered at a local police station in Asunción what became known as the "terror archives," which detailed the fate of thousands of people who were secretly kidnapped, tortured and killed by the national security services of the aforementioned countries. Judicial officials in some of these countries later used portions of these archives to prosecute former military officers for human rights violations. The archives contained information about the secret incarceration of an estimated 400,000 alleged subversives, of which about 50,000 were murdered and more than 30,000 were "disappeared" (called "*los desaparecidos*"), meaning that their whereabouts are known but they are presumed dead. These murders, assassinations and disappearances carried out by national

security agencies of the respective countries were categorized as “extra-judicial executions” by international human rights organizations.

Rodríguez, who was president of Paraguay from 1989 to 1993, had been closely linked to Stroessner and allegedly amassed a fortune from drug smuggling under that regime; consequently, he was banned from travelling to the USA. In 1989, to the surprise of many, Rodríguez launched a coup against Stroessner with the backing of segments of the Colorado Party and the Catholic Church, along with the support of the US government that no longer valued Stroessner as its ally against the spread of Communism in Latin America’s Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay).

In order to satisfy his political backers, Rodríguez abolished the death penalty, ended martial law and tried, convicted and imprisoned some of the leading members of the Stroessner regime. He also instituted democratic multi-party elections, the first of which he won under the banner of the Colorado Party. Rodríguez continued Paraguay’s relationship with the Republic of China (ROC, in Taiwan), thereby keeping Taiwan’s development assistance and access to its commercial markets. In 1992, the Paraguayan Legislature approved a new Constitution that prohibited re-elections for executive positions, which required Rodríguez to relinquish power and handover the Presidency to civilian rule. Political forces loyal to Rodríguez managed to include a clause in the new Constitution that granted immunity to former presidents, which allowed Rodríguez to avoid prosecution from his alleged drug-smuggling businesses. He stepped down as President in 1993, due to failing health, and was succeeded by **Juan Carlos Wasmosy Monti** (born in Asunción in 1938 of Hungarian ancestry) of the Colorado Party who served from 1993 to 1998 as the first civilian president in 39 years.

Wasmosy, who was endorsed by Rodríguez as his successor in the 1993 elections, won with approximately 40 percent of the vote in what is generally acknowledged to be the first honest election in the country’s republican history. Although there were a few confirmed cases of fraud, a team of international election observers led by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter concluded that Wasmosy’s margin of victory was large enough to offset any wrongdoing. It was also noted that the opposition candidates took 60 percent of the vote between them, which is remarkable in a country where the opposition had been barely tolerated during most of the nation’s history to that point.

However, Wasmosy became very unpopular when he appointed many of Stroessner’s supporters to government posts, and he also failed to continue the limited reforms implemented by Rodríguez. General Lino Oviedo, head of the Paraguayan Army, allegedly attempted a coup against Wasmosy in April 1996, but Wasmosy countered by offering Oviedo a ministerial position. However, a few months before the 1998 election, Oviedo was sentenced to 10 years in prison for his role in the 1996 coup and was disqualified from being a presidential candidate.

In 2002, after leaving office, Wasmosy was convicted for fraud and embezzlement (\$40 million) and was sentenced to four years in prison; however, he appealed his sentence, paid a bond of \$830,000 and was placed on parole.

In 1998, **Raúl Cubas Grau** (born in 1943), who replaced Oviedo as the presidential candidate of Colorado Party, won the election; and his main campaign pledge was to free Oviedo. Three days

after his inauguration, Cubas reduced Oviedo's sentence to time already served and released him from jail. Despite an order from the Supreme Court in December 1998, Cubas refused to send Oviedo back to jail. In response, in February 1999, Congress voted to charge Cubas with abuse of power. The vote was only two votes short of that necessary for a formal impeachment.

Meanwhile, Cubas' vice-president, Luis María Argaña, who had been named as Cubas' running mate to prevent the Colorado Party from losing the election but who was leading the anti-Oviedo bloc within the Colorado Party, was brutally murdered in March 1999. His murder was allegedly done by a group with ties to Oviedo, and Cubas was immediately implicated in the plot. Thousands of citizens participated in public demonstrations, led by striking workers, who demanded that Cubas resign. After public security forces were called out to control the demonstrators, seven people were shot to death and dozens were injured when the protest turned violent. Cubas' political support virtually evaporated and Congress voted overwhelmingly to impeach him. Faced with certain conviction and removal from office, Cubas resigned immediately and fled to Brazil. Cubas was replaced by the president of the Senate, **Luis Ángel Gonzalez Macchi**, who completed Cubas' term in office, from 1999 to 2003, in representation of the Colorado Party. Cubas returned to Paraguay in 2002 and was immediately arrested and tried for corruption and conspiracy to murder Argaña, but he was later cleared of all charges.

The current president of Paraguay is Fernando Armindo Lugo Méndez (since August 2008), formerly the Roman Catholic bishop of the Diocese of San Pedro, which has the nation's highest poverty rate. At age 19, Lugo entered a Society of the Divine Word seminary and was ordained a priest in 1977. He was sent to Ecuador as a missionary for five years, where he worked among the poor and adopted the controversial Theology of Liberation. He returned to Paraguay in 1982, but after a year the Stoessner government sought to expel him from the country because of his leftist political views. Consequently, officials of the Society of the Divine Word sent him to Rome for further academic studies. Lugo returned to his homeland in 1987, two years prior to the fall of the Stroessner dictatorship. He was ordained bishop in 1994 and appointed to lead the nation's poorest diocese, in the department of San Pedro.

Lugo resigned as bishop of the Diocese of San Pedro in 2005 after he had requested laicization (removal of the right to exercise the functions of the priestly office) in order to run for public office. However, the Holy See refused the request on the grounds that bishops could not undergo laicization, and also denied him the requested canonical permission to run for civil elected office. Subsequently, he resigned from the priesthood following his declaration of his candidacy for the nation's presidency.

Lugo entered the national political arena by backing the peasants' claims for improving land distribution. During 2006, public opinion polls published by the *Diario ABC Color* newspaper showed him as a possible front-runner as the opposition's presidential candidacy. Lugo, known as "the bishop of the poor," was seen in the subsequent months as the most serious threat to the dominance of the Colorado Party in Paraguayan politics. Although Lugo said that he finds the presidency of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela "interesting," he has also made a point to distance himself from leftist leaders in Latin America, and to focus more on resolving the urgent problem of social inequality in Paraguay. In February 2007, the Paraguayan Interior Ministry offered Lugo police protection because of death threats he received after declaring his presidential ambitions.

In October 2007, Lugo registered himself as a member of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) in order to become qualified to run for office. The PDC integrated a coalition of more than a dozen opposition parties and social movements, named the Patriotic Alliance for Change. Federico Franco of the center-right Authentic Radical Liberal Party (Paraguay's largest opposition party) became Lugo's running mate.

In November 2007, **President Nicanor Duarte Frutos** (2002-2008) announced that the Colorado Party (ARN) would not initiate any legal proceedings to block Lugo's candidacy, although there was a debate going on about its legality because Article 235 of the Constitution forbids ministers of any religious denomination to hold elective office. However, in July 2008, Pope Benedict XVI downgraded Lugo to layman's status so that he could assume the presidency without violating ecclesiastical law.

In April 2008, Lugo won the presidential election by a margin of 10 percentage points, although far short of a majority. The Colorado Party candidate, Blanca Ovelar, acknowledged that Lugo had an unassailable lead and conceded the electoral race. Later, President Duarte acknowledged that the Colorado Party had lost an election for the first time in 61 years. Lugo became Paraguay's second leftist president – the first was Rafael Franco who served during 1936-1937 – and the first to be freely elected. Also, Lugo's swearing in ceremony marked the first time since Paraguayan Independence in 1811 that a ruling party had peacefully surrendered power to an elected member of the opposition.

Roman Catholic Church

Iberian Roman Catholicism entered Paraguay with the Spanish conquistadors, and a papal decree created the Bishopric of Our Lady of Asunción in 1547, eleven years after the foundation of Asunción by Juan de Ayolas in 1536. The first bishop was Father Pedro de La Torre, a Franciscan, who arrived at Asunción in 1555 during the second administration of Martínez de Irala. The Diocese was directly dependent upon the Holy See in Rome, and, its jurisdiction extended over the whole Río de la Plata territory, which was divided into 102 parishes, six of which were located in the capital. The present Cathedral of Asunción was formally dedicated on 27 October 1845.

Most importantly for the development of the Catholic Church, after 1588 Jesuit and Franciscan priests began evangelizing among the Guaraní and other Amerindian groups along various rivers, including areas now part of surrounding nations, with the intent of pacifying and converting them. They developed a system of communal towns that closely paralleled the agricultural society that had previously developed among the Guaraní. They also developed a written form of the Guaraní language.

The Jesuits soon realized they had to protect the Amerindians from enslavement by Spanish and Portuguese colonists if they were going to convert them to the Catholic faith. From 1609 to 1767, the Jesuits established and maintained missions among the Guaraní and other tribes in the upper Río de la Plata region, where the natives were settled in a system of communal towns, called Reductions (*reducciones*), under Jesuit administration.

The Treaty of Madrid in 1750 transferred the territory occupied by the Jesuit-Guaraní missions from the jurisdiction of Spain to Portugal. Although Spain, at least officially, no longer permitted slavery, this inhumane practice was legal in the Portuguese territories. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish rulers ordered the Jesuit missions to be disbanded, and Pope Clement XIV suppressed the Jesuits, forcing the missionaries to abandon their work in approximately 100 Reductions in the Americas, including those in Paraguay. However, in 1754, the Guaraní Indians and a few dissident Jesuits refused to abide by the order to disband the missions and created a short-lived rebellion that was cruelly put down by the Spanish authorities.

The work of the Jesuits came into conflict with the growing desire of wealthy Spanish landowners to control Paraguay and this contributed to the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 by Spain's King Charles III. Many of the Paraguayan Indians were captured and sold into slavery, where they were gradually absorbed into *mestizo* society; however, those who escaped usually returned to their indigenous way of life in remote areas. After 1767, the spiritual administration of the Jesuit Reductions was transferred to the Franciscans and other religious orders, while the public administration was given to Spanish and Portuguese civil officials.

The church suffered greatly through the 19th century. It lost half its members in the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870) and never had enough priests. Catholicism still dominates throughout the land, but the church remains relatively poor, and the folk Catholicism that has arisen in various parts of South America, mixing Catholic faith with traditional animistic religions, is widespread in Paraguay.

For much of the 19th century, Church-State relations ranged from indifferent to hostile. The State assumed the prerogatives of royal patronage that the Vatican had granted to the Spanish rulers and sought to control both the bishops and the clergy. President José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814-1840) was committed to a secular state; he was frugal and cruel beyond description; he hated all foreigners and was fearful of all foreign entanglements; and he was violently anti-clerical. He suppressed monastic orders, eliminated the tithe, instituted civil marriage and cut off communication with the Vatican. President Francisco Solano López (1862-1870) used the Church as if it were a branch of the government; he enlisted priests as secret agents to report on signs of disaffection and subversion among the populace.

Church-State relations worsened after the government executed the Bishop of Asunción, Manuel Antonio Palacio, during the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870). When the war ended, there were only 55 priests left in the whole country, and the Church was without a bishop for 11 years.

The modern Paraguayan Catholic Church was established largely under the direction of Mons. Juan Sinfiorano Bogarón, the Archbishop of Asunción from 1930 to 1949, and under Mons. Aníbal Mena Porta, the Archbishop from 1949 to 1969. Both envisioned as a Church whose role in Paraguay's political struggles was that of a neutral mediator among the various contenders for power. Msgr. Ismael Blas Roldán Silvero served as archbishop from 1970 to 1989 and was followed by Msgr. Felipe Santiago Benitez Avalos (1989-2002). Contemporary archbishops have stressed the importance of respecting human rights, strengthening democracy, and encouraging political dialogue among all social sectors.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the bishops and priests were frequently at odds with the national government. Confrontations began with individual priests who preached sermons calling for political freedom and social justice. The political and human rights activities of the clergy and various lay groups, such as Catholic Action, pushed the Church hierarchy to make increasingly critical statements about the regime of President Alfredo Stroessner Mattiauda (since 1954), who was finally overthrown by a military coup in 1989.

Bible scholar José Luis Caravias has worked with the Christian Agrarian Leagues since the 1960s; he was the principal editor of *Vivir como Hermanos* (Live as Brothers), published in 1971, which is one of the most important documents produced in Paraguay by proponents of Liberation Theology, a socially and politically progressive Latin American Catholic movement.

Diverse tensions arose within the Paraguayan Catholic Church during the 1960s and following years, which resulted from challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. These powerful new currents polarized Catholic bishops, priests (diocesan and religious), lay brothers and sisters (members of religious orders), and the laity in general into various factions. *Traditionalists* wanted the Church to remain as it was prior to the reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council (mid-1960s), with an emphasis on apostolic authority, orthodox theology, the sacraments and personal piety. *Reformers* generally supported the Church's post-Vatican II stance of modernization and toleration of diversity based on its official Social Doctrine. *Progressives*, inspired by reforms approved at the Vatican II and Medellín conferences, sought to implement the new vision for "a preferential option for the poor" through social and political action aimed at transforming Paraguayan society and establishing social justice through peaceful democratic means. *Radicals* adopted the Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology and advocated violent revolution by the people as a means of overthrowing the rightwing military dictatorships and creating a Socialist State that would serve the poor marginalized masses. *Charismatic agents* sought to transform the spiritual and communal life of Catholics by means of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including the "baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues"), rather than by political and social activism.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Church authorities criticized the lack of political freedom in Paraguay and the government's dismal human rights record, and there were sporadic student demonstrations against the government and its repressive countermeasures. The government expelled foreign-born clergy and periodically closed the Catholic University of Our Lady of Asunción, the Catholic news magazine and the radio station. In response, the Archbishop of Asunción excommunicated several prominent government officials and refused, along with other clergy, to participate in major civic and religious celebrations.

In the early 1990s, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Paraguay, in a pronouncement entitled "One Constitution for our Nation" signed by 14 bishops, stated: "If at other times this nation completely identified itself with the Catholic religion, it was logical to talk about an official religion. Now pluralism better characterizes the civil society and it does not seem justified to have one Church joined to the State that, for this reason, reflects something imposed by force upon the people. The [Catholic] Church does not want to confuse the people or to confuse itself with the State."

In this way, the Catholic Church of Paraguay gave its unconditional support to establish a new era of religious liberty in the nation, which began with congressional approval of a new Constitution in February of 1993.

Roman Catholicism still dominates the nation. About 5.3 million Paraguayans were Catholics in 2002 (or about 89.6 percent of the national population). The traditional animistic religions of the Paraguayan Amerindians have survived, although mixed with an overlay of Roman Catholicism during colonial times. This has created a Paraguayan “popular Catholicism” (syncretistic) among Amerindians and the Hispanic population. For many Paraguayans, affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church is more of a social obligation than a moral and spiritual commitment, with less than 20 percent of Catholics regularly attending Mass.

However, one of the main events in the Catholic calendar is the annual pilgrimage to the colonial city **Caacupé** (founded in 1770), the capital of the Province of Cordillera, in the southwestern region. There a major religious festival is held on 8 December in honor of the statuette of Our Lady of the Miracles. This statuette, carved in the 16th century by a devout convert, is believed to have curative powers (syncretism). An enormous basilica stands in the center of town, where an estimated 300,000 people gather annually for the festival.

In 2001, the Archdioceses of Asunción had only 774,000 Catholic adherents out of the city’s total population of 1,602,173, or about 48 percent. However, the lowest percentage of Catholic adherents was registered in the Apostolic Vicariate of Polcomayo, with only 45.7 percent of the total population of 75,000 inhabitants. In the rest of the nation’s dioceses, the Catholic population ranged in the 80 and 90 percentiles in 2001. Religious nominalism seems to be the dominant characteristic of Paraguayan Catholicism today.

In 2004, the Paraguayan Catholic Church reported one archdiocese (Asunción, designed in 1929) and 13 dioceses with 358 parishes that were served by 355 secular priests and 428 religious priests (total of 783), assisted by 120 permanent deacons, 745 male religious and 2,132 female religious workers. The archbishop is Eustaquio Pastor Cuquejo Verga, C.S.S.R. (Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer), appointed in 2002.

The Protestant Movement

The first Protestant work began in Paraguay in the mid-19th century with the arrival of agents of the American Bible Society (1856) and later missionaries of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1886), the Church of England-Anglicans (1886) and the German Lutherans (1893, Evangelical Church of the Plata River).

It was a North American Methodist who became the first resident missionary in Paraguay in 1886. Two years later, the CHURCH OF ENGLAND arrived when the South American Missionary Society (SAMS) shifted its focus from the indigenous Patagonians of southern Argentina to the Chaco region of Paraguay. Among the society’s accomplishments were the development of a written language for the Lengua people and the production of a Lengua Bible.

During the early 20th century, dozens of other Protestant groups appeared among the growing immigrant population or as the result of missionary endeavors from Europe and North America, and a variety of Pentecostal and other non-Pentecostal groups have been founded in more recent times, especially during the 1950s and 1960s.

Notable among the groups to establish work in Paraguay after 1900 were the U.S.-based **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH** (1900), which was the first to arrive, followed by the **New Testament Missionary Fellowship** (1902), the Inland South American Missionary Society (1902), Christian Missions in Many Lands (1909, Plymouth Brethren), and The Salvation Army (1910), with most of the later groups from Great Britain.

In 1917, the United Christian Missionary Society (**CHRISTIAN CHURCH - DISCIPLES OF CHRIST**), arrived and eventually took over the Methodist work. In 1919, the Argentine Baptist Convention began work in Paraguay, and they later appealed to the SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION for assistance (1945).

In 1927, the first Mennonite colony was established among Russian immigrants, which led to the involvement of the Mennonite Central Committee in 1930. The New Testament Missionary Union arrived in 1931, followed by the Mennonite Brethren Church of America in 1935 that began work among the Lengua Amerindians. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod sent their first missionaries in 1938 to work among German immigrants.

The arrival of the first Pentecostal missions among European immigrants in 1938 (the Filadelfia Church of Stockholm and the Swedish Free Mission) led to the introduction of Argentine Assemblies of God in 1943 and the U.S. Assemblies of God in 1945, who came to assist their Russian colleagues. Since then, Pentecostalism has grown very well in Paraguay, and a number of autochthonous Pentecostal churches have arisen in recent years.

The impact of World War II was a further catalyst for the development of religion in Paraguay. The Society of Brothers (now the BRUDERHOF), a German communal group modeled on the HUTTERITES, escaped Germany and settled in Paraguay in 1941. They were joined by Russian and Ukrainian immigrants who also found their way to Paraguay during the early 1940s. Paraguay became a magnet for **Mennonites**, the first being refugees from the newly-established Soviet Union. After getting settled, they began missionary work among the people of the Chaco region and appealed for assistance from North American Mennonites. As a result an extensive work was developed among a group of agricultural colonies that eventually became the EVANGELICAL MENNONITE CHURCH IN PARAGUAY.

A few other denominations also arrived during the 1940s: Full Gospel Grace Fellowship (1940), the Free Methodist Church of North America (1948-1952), nondenominational fundamentalist New Tribes Mission (1946), General Conference Mennonite Church (1952), Evangelical Lutheran Church (1949), the Mennonite Mission Network (1952), the Church of God World Missions (1954, from Cleveland, TN), and the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (1957, from Canada).

Historically, only five Protestant missions and service agencies arrived prior to 1900; 12 more arrived between 1900 and 1939; 20 additional groups arrived between 1940 and 1979; and since 1980, at least 30 new groups have begun work in Paraguay.

Prior to the 1950s, the total Protestant population in Paraguay was less than 10,000, but by 2002 had grown to 364,839 or 6.2 percent of the total population (2002 census). The largest Protestant denominations in Paraguay were the Evangelical Baptist Convention (10,500 adherents; Southern Baptist-related); the Assemblies of God (USA-related) and the Assemblies of God Evangelical Mission (independent) with a combined total of 9,879 adherents; the Evangelical Church of the Plata River (Lutheran, with 8,850 adherents); all Mennonites (8,850 adherents); the Seventh-day Adventist Church (7,800 adherents); Anglicans (about 1,900 adherents); and the Church of God (Cleveland, TN – 1,550 adherents). Also, there are two dozen Mennonite denominations and service organizations that represent an estimated community 70,000 (all ages), most of whom are found among the 17 agricultural colonies that are scattered across the northern and eastern regions of Paraguay.

Other Religions

An estimated 2.1 percent of the population represented adherents of other religious groups in 2002. One of these was the **Ukrainian Orthodox Church** with about 500 adherents and another 975 Orthodox believers (unspecified) were reported in 2002 (census). Also present are the following **non-Protestant marginal Christian groups**: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons, 9,374 adherents in 2002), Jehovah's Witnesses (11,805 adherents in 2002), the independent quasi-Pentecostal **PEOPLE OF GOD CHURCH** (with about 12,000 adherents in 2002, although church officials claim 150,000 adherents!), the God is Love Pentecostal Church (1,300 adherents), the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (700 adherents), the Voice of the Chief Cornerstone, among others.

A variety of non-Christian religions have appeared, many since 1940, especially among immigrants from the Middle East (Judaism, Islam and Baha'i) and Asia (Hindu, Buddhist and Shinto sects). Animistic Amerindian religions continue to exist, especially in the western region of the Chaco, with an estimated 25,000 adherents in 2002 (census).

By 1912 enough **Jews** had migrated to Paraguay, primarily from Germany, to justify the organization of the initial Jewish community. Today, there were an estimated 1,100 Jews in Paraguay in 2002, whose primary structure is the *Consejo Representativo Israelita del Paraguay*, headquartered in Asunción. The capital city has three synagogues: Ashkenazi, Sephardi and Chabad.

There is a small **Muslim community** in Paraguay (872 adherents in 2002), mainly in the provinces of Asunción and Alto Paraná (under 500), as a result of Middle-Eastern immigration from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. The Subud Association is also present. **The Baha'i Faith** established its first local spiritual assembly in Asunción in 1944. It has spread among the Yanaigua, Chulupi and Maka indigenous peoples.

Immigrants from Korea and Japan introduced **Buddhism** (about 2,000 adherents in 2002) and **Japanese religions**, including Scheicho-No-Ie, Shintoism, Soka Gakkai International, Reiyukai America, Nichiren Shoshu, Tenrykyo, and the Fokuangshan Buddhist Order.

Hinduism is represented by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISHKON), Transcendental Meditation, and the Sri Sathya Sai Baba International Organization.

Also present in Paraguay are a variety of other religious movements representing the **Ancient Wisdom tradition**: Rosicrucians, the Grand Universal Fraternity (GFU from Venezuela), the Center of Gnostic Studies of Anthropology and Sciences, New Acropolis Cultural Centers, and the Cafh Foundation; the **Afro-Brazilian religions** of Condomblé and Umbanda; the **Psychic-Spiritualist-New Age traditions**: the Basilio Scientific School, Kardec Spiritualist Centers, the Paraguayan Center of Spiritualist Philosophy, the Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, among others. In 2000, officials of the Unification Church purchased 300,000 hectares of land in Paraguay for logging and timber exportation to Asia. The acquired land is the ancestral territory of the indigenous Chamacoco (Ishir) people, who live in the northern region of the country.

The population with no religion or no declared religious affiliation (includes atheists and agnostics) was 2.1 percent in 2002 (about 81,500 persons).

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