

LATIN AMERICAN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROGRAM -
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(PROLADES)

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

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Religion in Venezuela

Country Summary

Venezuela is located in northeastern South America on the Caribbean Sea between Colombia to the west and Guyana to the east. Its southern border, which reaches into the Amazon River basin, is shared with Brazil. Geographically, Venezuela is a land of vivid contrasts, with four major divisions: the Maracaibo lowlands in the northwest, the northern mountains (the most northeastern section of the Andes) extending in a broad east-west arc from the Colombian border along the Caribbean Coast, the savannas of the Orinoco River Basin in central Venezuela, and the Guyana highlands in the southeast.

The 1999 Constitution changed the name of the Republic of Venezuela to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The nation is composed of 20 federal states and a federal district, which contains the capital of Caracas. The country has an area of 352,144 square miles and about 85 percent of the national population lives in urban areas in the northern portion of the country, near the Caribbean Coast. Almost half of Venezuela's land area lies south of the Orinoco River, which contains only 5 percent of the total population.

Caracas is the nation's largest city with 3.2 million inhabitants (2008); however, Metropolitan District of Caracas has a population of about 5 million and includes the City of Caracas (Distrito Federal) and four municipalities in Miranda State: Chacao, Baruta, Sucre and El Hatillo. Other major cities are Maracaibo (3.2 million), Valencia (1.5 million), Maracay (1.8 million), Barquisimeto (1.5 million), Barcelona-Puerto La Cruz (950,000), and Ciudad Guayana (950,000).



According to the National Statistics Institute, the nation's total population for 31 January 2007 was 27,750,163 inhabitants. About 60 percent of the population are mestizo (mixed races: Caucasian, African and Amerindian), 29 percent Caucasian (mostly Spanish, Italian, German and Portuguese), 8 percent Afro-Venezuelan, 1 percent Asian-Middle Eastern (Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean and Middle Easterners) and 2 percent Amerindian. The national and official language is Spanish, although 31 Indigenous languages are spoken. Immigrant communities and their descendents commonly use their own native languages. Major languages spoken by immigrants include: Portuguese (254,000), Arabic (110,000), Italian (50,000), Chinese (estimates vary from 50,000 to 400,000), and English (20,000).

The predominant Amerindian groups (145,230) in Venezuela today are: Wayuu(170,000), Warao (28,100), Yanomamö (15,700), Piaroa (12,200), Guahibo (11,200), Yukpa (6,100), Pumé

(5,840), Maquiritari (5,520), Pemon (5,000), Sanumá (4,610), Carib (4,450), Mandahuaca (3,000), Maco (2,500), and Nhengatu (2,000).

The Venezuelan people have a combination of ethnic heritages. The Amerindians, Spanish colonists and imported African slaves were joined by European groups and others from neighboring countries of South America during waves of immigration in the 20th century. There are various communities of Eastern Europeans, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece and Hungary. Some Venezuelans trace their ancestry to 10,000 expatriates from the Southern U.S. who arrived after the Civil War (1865). The multi-racial/ethnic combination is evident in Venezuelan culture: food, music, clothing, holidays and the *mestizaje* identity.

Current Religious Situation

Immigration since World War II has not only increased the spectrum of Christian denominations in the country, but also brought many of the world's religions to Venezuela. The 1961 Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion to all faiths; Church and the State are separate, although the majority of people still refer to themselves as Roman Catholic.

According to government estimates in 2006, 70 percent of the population was Roman Catholic, 29 percent was non-Roman Catholic Christians (which includes Eastern Orthodox, Protestant and other marginal Christian groups, such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses), and the remaining 1 percent were "other religions" or claimed no religious affiliation. However, the Evangelical Council of Venezuela estimated that Evangelical Protestants constituted approximately 10 percent of the population.

A public opinion poll conducted in December 2000 for the World Values Survey ("Encuesta Mundial de Valores," published in *Diario El Universal*, 14 October 2001) found that only 65.6 percent of the population claimed to be Roman Catholics, 5.24 percent were Protestants, 1.17 percent were members of marginal Christian groups (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and others), 1.0 percent were affiliated with other religions, and an astonishing 27.0 percent stated they had no religious affiliation.

Obviously, further scientific research needs to be done on religious affiliation in Venezuela to clarify the present situation and to explain the vast differences between these polling results compared to other polls and government estimates, especially regarding those with "no religious affiliation." The 2000 World Values Survey also reported that only 19.9 percent of the population were "practicing Catholics" (attended Mass at least once a week), compared to 65.6 percent who claimed to be Roman Catholic.

Some of those who claim Roman Catholic affiliation are also practitioners of spiritualist sects, such as the Cult of María Leonza and Santería, which are reported to be growing in Venezuela since President Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999. Chávez has increased his popularity among the masses by using magical religious imagery in his public discourses, appealing to their predisposition for "popular Catholicism," a syncretism of Roman Catholic, Amerindian and Afro-Caribbean beliefs and practices.

In 2008, the Constitution provided for freedom of religion, on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or public order; and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law, at all levels, seeks to protect this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, there were some efforts by the Chávez'

government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, social and political areas.

A 1964 Concordat governs relations between the State and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church. All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations. The State continues to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help the poor, although the subsidies were reduced in some states. The State continued to fund the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela at reduced levels. Other religious groups are free to establish their own schools. There were reports of government funding for certain evangelical groups, although much of this was related to social projects implemented via the government's social programs.

The government continues to prohibit foreign missionary groups from working in indigenous areas. In 2005, the Ministry of Interior rescinded permission for the New Tribes Mission (NTM) to conduct its social programs among indigenous tribes; NTM appealed to the Supreme Court, and the case is still pending. The NTM withdrew more than 100 missionaries from indigenous areas in compliance with the government's order. In 2005, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) withdrew 219 missionaries, citing difficulties in obtaining religious visas from the government. Some Mormon missionaries working with indigenous peoples were expelled from those areas, while the others departed voluntarily.

Overview of Social, Political and Religious Development

The territory known today as Venezuela was inhabited by an array of Amerindian groups in prehistoric times. The Carib (including the Tamaques, Maquiritares and Arecunas) settled along the Caribbean Coast, while other Native American groups settling in the mountains and in the Orinoco River basin of the interior, mainly Arawaks.

The coast of Venezuela was discovered by Christopher Columbus during his third voyage to the New World, on 1 August 1498. Its name, meaning "Little Venice," was given it by reason of the fact that Alonso de Ojeda, who first explored the coast in 1499, found a small aboriginal village built on stilts in the region of Lake Maracaibo. Modified into *Venezuela*, the name afterwards served to designate the whole territory of the captaincy general. Spanish settlements were established on the coast at Cumaná in 1520 and Santa Ana de Coro in 1527. The Spanish conquest was complete by 1600. By the end of the first century of Spanish rule, about half of the Amerindian tribes that existed previously in Venezuela had become extinct.

The Spanish settled mainly along the coast and began to build an agricultural colony based on cacao production, for which they imported slaves from Africa. Since then Venezuela has developed a regularly organized society with peculiar ethnic characteristics and a distinctive national culture. Venezuela was Spain's most successful agricultural colony, first with cacao (chocolate) production and export, and then, towards the end of the 18th century, with coffee.

During the colonial period, racial mixture was commonplace. The earliest conquerors brought no Spanish women with them, and many formed common-law relationships with Indian women. It was normal for the *mestizo* offspring of these unions to be recognized and legitimated by the fathers. African slavery was instituted in Venezuela to meet the growing labor demands of an emerging agricultural economy following the decline of Amerindian laborers. Many of the black slaves came to Venezuela not directly from Africa, but from other Spanish colonies, especially the West Indies. The offspring of slave-master and slave often was freed and might even have received some education and been named a beneficiary in the father's will.

As a result of these racial mixtures, Venezuelan society from its very beginnings displayed a more homogeneous ethnic makeup than most other Latin American colonies. The large group of freedmen worked mostly as manual laborers in the emerging cities or lived as peasants on small plots of land. Blacks, mulattos and *mestizos* occupied the lower rungs on the social ladder, but they still enjoyed a number of rights and guarantees provided by Spanish law and customs.

The colony of Venezuela was under the administration of governors and captains general during the 17th and 18th centuries. In 1718, Spanish colonial authorities organized the Viceroyalty of New Granada, with Venezuela as its easternmost region under a captaincy general.

Much of the movement for the independence of northern part of South America from Spain originated in Venezuela. The battles for Independence were fought between 1749 and 1830, during which Simón Bolívar became a national hero and built his dream of Gran Colombia (from what is today Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, northern Peru and Venezuela).

After an assembly of revolutionary leaders declared New Granada independent in 1810, the Republicans organized a military force under Gen. Francisco de Miranda. His capture by Spanish forces led to the emergence of another military leader, Gen. Simón Bolívar, who won the war. However, Bolívar soon discovered that the non-European people (Amerindians, Afro-Americans and those of mixed races) did not support him, because he was viewed as a representative of their white slave masters.

The definitive Declaration of Independence was issued by the Congress on 5 July 1811. This Declaration contains the following confession of faith: "Taking the Supreme Being as witness to the justice of our actions and the rectitude of our intentions; imploring His Divine and heavenly aid, and protesting before Him, in the moment of our birth to that dignity which His Providence restores to us, our desire to live and die free; believing and maintaining the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Religion of Jesus Christ as the first of our duties..."

Bolívar lost power to a Spanish loyalist, José Tomás Boves, who in 1814 abolished slavery and redistributed the land among the dispossessed. Only after Bolívar came to understand the needs of the non-Europeans was he able to gain the popular support necessary to finally break Spain's control of the region.

An independent New Granada (Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela) finally emerged in 1819 as the Republic of Gran Colombia. The War of Independence finally ended with the battle of Carabobo, won by the Liberator Simón Bolívar on 24 June 1821. When the Republic of Gran Colombia was dismembered, the Republic of Venezuela was established in 1830.

In the early days of independence, Gen. José Antonio Páez, another hero of the War of Independence, was prominent in political affairs, aided by Dr. José María Varjas and Gen. Carlos Toublette. Following this, for a period of ten years, the country wavered between content and discontent under the rule of the brothers José Tadeo and José Gregorio Monagas, also celebrated leaders in the War of Independence.

Thereafter, the country was ruled by an oligarchy under the leadership of an authoritarian leader (*caudillo*) well into the 20th century. The century of the caudillo started auspiciously, with sixteen relatively peaceful and prosperous years under the authority of General José Antonio Páez. Twice elected president under the 1830 Constitution, Páez, on the one hand, consolidated the young republic by putting down a number of armed challenges by regional chieftains; on the other hand, Páez usually respected the civil rights of his legitimate political opponents. Using funds earned during the coffee-induced economic boom, he oversaw the building of fledgling social and economic infrastructures. Generally considered second only to Bolívar as a national

hero, Páez ruled in conjunction with the *criollo* elite, which maintained its unity around the *mestizo* caudillo as long as coffee prices remained high.

In the 1840s, however, coffee prices plunged, and the elite divided into two factions: those who remained with Páez called themselves Conservatives, while his rivals called themselves Liberals. The Liberals first came to prominence in 1846 with Páez's surprising selection of General José Tadeo Monagas as his successor. Two years later, Monagas ousted all the Conservatives from his government and sent Páez into exile, precipitating a decade of dictatorial rule shared with his brother, José Gregorio. The abolition of slavery in 1854 was the only noteworthy act by the Monagas brothers. In 1857 they introduced a new constitution in an obvious attempt to install a Monagas family dynasty. The regime was ousted the following year in a revolt that included elite members of both parties.

The elite factions failed to agree on a replacement for Monagas, however, precipitating twelve years of intermittent civil war were chaotic. Between 1858 and 1863, local caudillos engaged in a chaotic power struggle known as the Federal War, because the Liberals favored federalism. In the end, the Liberals triumphed and General Juan C. Falcón was named president. In practice, federalism was a disaster. Falcón's general lack of interest in ruling and his failure to exert strong leadership allowed local caudillos to exert oppressive authoritarian control over their fiefdoms even while they continued to pay lip service to the concept of federalism.

Central government authority was finally restored in 1870 by Falcón's chief aide, Antonio Guzmán Blanco, who established a dictatorship that endured for eighteen years. During his term of office, strife and bloodshed continued, and Venezuela suffered from despotism such as the nation had not known up to this time.

During the 20th century, Venezuela emerged as one of the wealthiest nations in South America because of the development of its petroleum industry in and around Lake Maracaibo, in the northwestern region, near the Colombian border. Economic growth was slow until 1914, when an extensive petroleum deposit was discovered near city of Maracaibo, in the state of Zulia. Since 1918, Dutch, British and American companies have developed the rich oil fields found in several regions of the country. Many immigrants have assisted in the development of its industries.

This transformed the Venezuelan economy, and today this nation is the third-largest producer in OPEC, with particularly large reserves of heavy bitumen in the southeastern Orinoco River basin. The extra revenue meant that the road system could be developed to become the envy of South America, and Caracas and other central cities were virtually rebuilt.

The dependence on oil revenues has meant that other sectors such as agriculture and tourism have been underdeveloped and with the late 1970's fall in oil prices inflation has risen somewhat from the previous 10 percent levels, as successive governments realized they must diversify the economy. The discovery of very rich iron ore deposits, as well as gold, diamonds and nickel, has meant that the mining sector has been the most buoyant part of the economy since about 1984.

In 1908, Gen. Juan Vicente Gómez took this opportunity to overthrow the dictator Guzmán and assume absolute power. Gómez was the consummate Venezuelan caudillo. He ruled the nation from 1908 to 1935, alternating between the posts of president and minister of war. A series of puppet legislatures drafted and promulgated six new constitutions at the bidding of the dictator, while the judiciary enforced the will of the "Tyrant of the Andes" within the courts.

The dictator's principal power base was the army, which was used to destroy all of Gómez' regional foes. This "national" army was prudently provided with high salaries and generous

benefits, the most modern weapons, and instruction from the Prussian-trained Chilean military. But Gómez' most important means of eliminating political foes was his ubiquitous secret police force. Although some opponents escaped with a simple reprimand, thousands of others (those who did not manage to escape into exile) were locked up--rarely with the benefit of a trial--in prisons where death by starvation or at the hands of torturers was commonplace.

Gómez justified his harsh dictatorship as the form of government (*caudillismo*) preferred by the predominantly mixed-race Venezuelans. The Gómez regime coincided with a protracted period favorable to Venezuelan exports. Coffee exports boomed, both in volume and price, during the early years of his rule. Most important, however, the foreign exploitation of Venezuela's petroleum reserves began in 1918, augmenting government revenues to a degree previously unknown and allowing Gómez to pay off the nation's entire foreign debt and to institute a public works program. The beginnings of an urban middle class were also evident in the bureaucracy that grew up around the booming Venezuelan oil industry. The provision of required local services to the oil industry further expanded this new middle class.

The true beneficiaries of the petroleum boom, however, were Gómez himself, the army, and the dictator's associates from Táchira. For the vast majority of Venezuelans, the petroleum era brought reduced employment (oil being a capital-intensive industry) and high food prices, stemming from a decline in domestic agricultural activity and an increase in imports. Inflation increased and real wages declined. Little improvement took place in public education and health care, and although the capital-intensive petroleum industry grew impressively, oil-derived revenue was not applied to labor-intensive efforts, such as agricultural diversification or the promotion of small-scale industry.

Subsequent events propelled the students at the Central University of Venezuela, in Caracas, into the most significant opposition to the Gómez regime. Having closely observed the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Russian Revolution of 1917, the students launched a struggle in 1928 to liberate Venezuela from Gómez' dictatorial grip. The revolt began in February, when several university students were arrested for making anti-government speeches. In protest, other students then challenged the dictator to jail them as well, and Gómez complied by arresting 200 student activists. A popular demonstration followed. Police dispersed the demonstrators with firearms, killing and wounding many participants. With the assistance of a few young military officers, the rebels then stormed the presidential palace, which they managed to occupy briefly before being overwhelmed by Gómez' troops. Gómez then closed the university and rounded up the students, many of whom ended up laboring on road gangs.

Some of the movement's leadership languished or died in prison; those of "the generation of 1928" who managed to escape into exile, like Rómulo Betancourt, Rafael Caldena Rodríguez and Raúl Leoni, were later to become the nation's principal political leaders.

Two subsequent efforts to overthrow Gómez – executed by long- exiled caudillo rivals who believed that their landings on the Venezuelan coast would trigger popular insurrections – ended in failure. The "Tyrant of the Andes" ruled until his death, by natural causes, in December 1935 at age seventy-nine. The event precipitated widespread looting, property destruction, and the slaughter of Gómez family members and collaborators by angry mobs in Caracas and Maracaibo. Gómez's twenty-seven years in power (1908-1935) brought to a close Venezuela's century of *caudillismo* and, according to many historians, his demise marked the beginning of Venezuela's modern period.

Following Gómez' death, Gen. Eleazar López Contreras finished his term of office. In 1936, Congress selected López to serve his own five-year term in office (1936-1941). In 1941,

the López controlled Congress selected Minister of War Gen. Isaías Medina Angarita (ruled from 1941 to 1945) to replace López. After decades of authoritarian rule, Gen. Medina legalized the National Democratic Party (Partido Democrático Nacional, PDN), which paved the way for a transition to democratic government. The PDN, which changed its name to Democratic Action (Acción Democrática, AD), soon constituted a vociferous minority in local governments and, after the January 1943 elections, in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house of Congress; the upper house is the Senate). The president responded by organizing his own political party, the Venezuelan Democratic Party (Partido Democrático Venezolano, PDV).

An ambitious economic development plan, announced by Medina in 1942, was interrupted during World War II when German submarines played havoc with tankers transporting Venezuela's oil to European and North American markets. New laws governing the state's relationship with foreign oil companies in 1943 resulted in substantially increased revenues, spurring renewed development efforts in 1944. Construction activity boomed during the waning years of the war, a period that also saw the passage of Venezuela's first income tax and social security laws.

Rómulo Ernesto Betancourt Bello (b.1908-d.1981), known as "The Father of Venezuelan Democracy," was President of Venezuela from 1945 to 1948 and again from 1959 to 1964, as well as leader of Acción Democrática, which became Venezuela's dominant political party in the 20th century. Betancourt became president in 1945 by means of a military coup d'état and, during his time in office, completed an impressive agenda. His accomplishments included the declaration of universal suffrage, the institution of social reforms, and securing half of the profits generated by foreign oil companies for Venezuela. His government worked closely with the International Refugee Organization to aid European refugees and displaced persons who could not or would not return home after World War II; his government assumed responsibility for the legal protection and resettlement of tens of thousands of refugees inside Venezuela.

Rómulo Gallegos Freire (b.1884-d.1969, Acción Democrática) served as president for a period of nine months during 1948, until he was overthrown by Carlos Delgado Chalbaud, Marcos Pérez Jiménez and Luis Felipe Llovera Páez, who also forced former President Betancourt into exile. Carlos Delgado Chalbaud became chairman of the Military Junta that governed Venezuela during 1948-1950. He was kidnapped and assassinated in November 1950, allegedly by his fellow junta member Jiménez, who established a brutal dictatorship (1950-1958) that delayed the establishment of representative democracy in the nation until 1958. Since then, and continuing to the present, relatively-free elections have been held every five years.

Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías (b.1954) is the current President of Venezuela (since 1998). As the leader of the Bolivarian Revolution (named after the Liberator Simón Bolívar), Chávez promotes a political doctrine of participatory democracy, socialism and Latin American and Caribbean cooperation. He is also a strong critic of neoliberalism, globalization, and U.S. foreign policy. A career military officer, Chávez founded the left-wing Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) after orchestrating a failed 1992 coup d'état against former President Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974 to 1979 and again from 1989 to 1993, under Democratic Action).

Chávez was elected President in 1998 with a campaign centering on promises of aiding Venezuela's poor majority, and was reelected in 2000 and in 2006. Domestically, Chávez has maintained nationwide Bolivarian Circles, which he cites as examples of grassroots and participatory democracy, whose goals are to combat disease, illiteracy, malnutrition, poverty, and other social ills. The Bolivarian Circles are forums for a few hundred local residents who decide how to spend the government allowance for social development. They usually decide for

neighborhood beautification, mass mobilization, lending support to small businesses, and providing basic social services. Abroad, Chávez has acted against the Washington Consensus by supporting alternative models of economic development, and has advocated cooperation among the world's poor nations, especially those in Latin America.

Chávez' policies have evoked strong controversy in Venezuela and abroad, and have received everything from vehement criticism to enthusiastic support. The U.S. Government under the Bush Administration claimed that Chávez was a threat to democracy in Latin America; however, many other governments sympathize with his ideology and welcome his bilateral trade and reciprocal aid agreements. In 2005 and 2006, Chávez was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people.

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*, PSUV) is the result of the fusion of some of the political and social forces that support the Bolivarian Revolution, led by incumbent President Chávez. It is the current ruling party of Venezuela and the largest left-wing party in Latin America and the Western Hemisphere. It has an approximate membership of 7 million people.

The Roman Catholic Church

Catholicism was introduced to Venezuela by FRANCISCANS and DOMINICANS in 1513. They created some of the first cocoa plantations and also taught the Amerindians the arts of domestic husbandry. The JESUITS operated within the vast savannas of the Orinoco River basin from 1628 until their expulsion in 1767. The Capuchins arrived in 1658 and over the next century spread out in the region around Caracas, where many of the settlements were founded by them.

The Diocese of Santa Ana de Coro was founded in Venezuela in 1531, which was transferred to the City of Santiago de León de Caracas and became the Diocese of Caracas in 1637; in November 1803 this diocese became the Archdiocese of Caracas, Santiago de Venezuela.

By 1662, the Catholic authorities had established five official zones for evangelization of the Amerindians: Llanos de Caracas, from the mouth of the Tuy River to Lake Maracaibo; Alto Orinoco Río Negro; Guayana, in the extreme eastern part of Venezuela; Trinidad; and Maracaibo. In 1734, the territory of Alto Orinoco was divided among the Capuchines, Franciscans and Jesuits.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Dominicans were responsible for 18 towns in Barinas and Rio Chico; the Franciscans 80 towns in Barcelona and Guayana; the Capuchines 108 towns in the Llanos de Caracas, 43 in Cumaná, 34 in Caroní, 26 in Maracaibo and 19 in Alto Orinoco; the Jesuits 6 in the Llanos del Meta and the Orinoco.

Venezuela's independence from Spain was a disaster for the Church, which had identified with the Spanish colonial leadership. The Church suffered a great loss of property and mission stations during the drawn-out War of Independence.

Conflicts between the Church and civil authorities occurred in the earliest period of the Republic's existence. The first of these arose out of the refusal of the Archbishop of Caracas to swear allegiance to the 1830 Constitution. This refusal, based on the absence of any explicit recognition of Catholicism as the State religion, resulted in the exile of the archbishop along with four bishops. Their exile lasted 16 months, after which the clerics (with the exception of the archbishop, who died in November 1831) returned in April 1832 upon reaching an understanding with the government.

During the 20-year rule of President Antonio Guzmán Blanco, the dictator poured out his wrath on the whole Church and its most prized institutions, in an attempt to destroy the influence of the clergy and their criticism of his despotism. He expelled the last religious communities of nuns left in Venezuela and suppressed the seminaries, despoiling them of their possessions and destroying the budding revival of religious education in the country. He also destroyed churches, took possession of church-owned buildings, abolished revenues for the Church, secularized the cemeteries, and defamed the clergy.

Finally, Guzmán decreed the total suppression of convents in the country and prohibited their future restoration. He even attempted to establish a national church independent of the Vatican, but without the slightest success. During Guzmán's administration, civil marriage took precedence over the religious ceremony, and this law became a constant source of public demoralization among the Catholic faithful.

After Guzmán's fall from power, there was a general reaction among the populace in favor of the Church, which brought certain advantages for the clergy and for the advancement of the Church. In 1886, the government itself invited the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph of Tarbes to provide needed services in the nation's hospitals. Later the Sisters of Charity were able to establish educational and charitable centers in many cities, where they were joined by another congregation of Sisters of Charity, those of St. Anne (Spanish). Other female religious orders were established to provide charitable work and catechistic instruction: the Little Sisters of the Poor of Maiquetia, the Servants of the Most Holy Sacrament, and the Franciscan Sisters.

In 1891, the government invited the Capuchin monks to work among the Amerindians in the Orinoco River basin, and they were allowed to establish residences in Caracas and Maracaibo. In 1894, the Salesians arrived and dedicated their efforts to the education of youth. The Augustinian Recollects arrived in 1899 to begin parochial work in the Archdiocese of Caracas and the Dioceses of Guayana and Zulia. In 1903, also at the invitation of the government, the Sons of Mary Immaculate (French Fathers) established themselves in Caracas, where they founded a college and provided need assistance to the secular clergy. That same year, the Dominican Fathers were allowed by the government to take possession of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Caracas, and later engaged in teaching at the seminary of Caracas.

In 1910, the Archdiocese of Caracas administered 82 parishes, in addition to 22 affiliated churches and private chapels; it also operated two seminaries for training the local priesthood. At that time, there were only a total of 35 male religious and 242 sisters. The Archbishop of Caracas, Mons. Juan Bautista Castro, founded the Congregation of Servants of the Most Holy Sacrament in Caracas in 1911.

The Catholic Church adopted a conservative theological and social stance throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it had great difficulty in recruiting national priests and religious workers. For example, in 1969, only 19 percent of religious priests and 43 percent of female religious were Venezuelans. Seventy-nine percent of the resident priests were born outside of Latin America and two percent were born in other Latin American countries. Forty-one percent of the resident nuns were born outside of Latin America and 16 percent were born in other Latin American countries.

During the 1960s and following years, diverse tensions and conflicts arose within the Colombian Catholic Church, which resulted from challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín in 1968, Latin American Liberation Theology and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

These new movements polarized Catholic bishops, parish priests, religious workers and the laity into various factions: *traditionalists* who wanted the Church to remain as it was prior to the reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council (late 1960s); *reformers* who supported the Church's modern stance; *progressives* who sought to implement the new vision for "a preferential option for the poor" through social and political action aimed at transforming Venezuelan society and establishing social justice through peaceful democratic means; *radicals* who adopted Liberation Theology, based on Marxist ideology, and advocated violent revolution by the people as a means of overthrowing the oligarchy and creating a socialist state that would serve the marginalized masses; and *charismatic agents* (priests, nuns and lay members) who 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").

Since the mid-1960s, the Venezuelan Catholic Church – influenced greatly by papal calls for a refocus of attention on the needs of the urban poor – has directed significant resources toward assisting the lower classes and empowering the laity in the local parishes.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) in Venezuela traces its origin to 1973, when the first Charismatic Conference was held at the Salesian retreat center in Los Teques, Miranda State, not far from downtown Caracas. Thereafter, the CCR became established and prospered in many locations throughout the country. In 1988, the CCR National Coordination Office was relocated from Maracaibo to Barquisimeto. In October of that year, 28 priests, 13 laypersons and five bishops from Venezuela participated in the international Catholic Charismatic Renewal Conference held in Monterrey, Mexico. Leading this delegation were Mons. Tulio Manuel Chirivella and Mons. Carmen de Rúa, the National CCR Advisor and the National CCR Coordinator, respectively, in Venezuela. In April 1989, the National Day of Prayer was celebrated in Valencia, Carabobo State, with the participation of 10,000 people, under the leadership of a team of Catholic charismatic priests and nuns.

In the mid-1970s, the principal male religious orders in Venezuela were: Agustinians, Benedictines, Capuchins, Claretins, Dominicans, Eudistas, French PP, Jesuits, Pasionists, Paulists, Redentorists, Salesias, Salle Brothers, Marists and Brothers of St. John of God. Female religious orders founded in Venezuela are: Hermanitas de los Pobres, Franciscanas, Siervas del Santísimo Sacramento, Lourdistas, Agustinas, Dominicinas and Carmelitas.

In 1995, Monseñor Ignacio Antonio Velasco García (b.1929) was appointed the XIV Archbishop of Caracas by Pope John Paul II. The current Archbishop of Caracas (Santiago de Venezuela) is Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino (appointed in 2005). The Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV), composed of the nation's archbishops, bishops and auxiliary personnel who meet periodically to manage church affairs, was first created in 1973.

The current CEV president is Mons. Ubaldo Ramón Santana Sequera, the Archbishop of Maracaibo. Presently, there are nine archdioceses in Venezuela: Barquisimeto, Caracas, Calabozo, Ciudad Bolívar, Coro, Cumaná, Maracaibo, Mérida and Valencia. The Venezuelan Catholic Church administers 36 dioceses (including four Apostolic Vicariates) with a total of 1,256 parishes. In 2004, these jurisdictions were served by 1,493 diocesan and 1,064 religious priests (a total of 2,557) and assisted by 138 permanent deacons, 1,628 religious brothers and 3,775 religious sisters.

Overall, there has been a decline in the number of priests and religious workers providing pastoral care and support services, which has weakened the Church's ability to retain adherents in Venezuela since the mid-1970s. For example, the Archdiocese of Caracas reported the following statistics in 2006: 140 diocesan and 419 religious priests (down from 160 and 600,

respectively, in 1976), 730 religious brothers (down from 757 in 1976), and 1,332 religious sisters (down from 1,500 in 1976).

The Protestant Movement

Agents of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) were the first to attempt the introduction of Protestantism into Venezuela, but as with the rest of South America, there was a gap of more than a half-century between their first arrival (1819) and the entrance of permanent Protestant missionaries (1883). In the meantime, the CHURCH OF ENGLAND established a chaplaincy to serve British nationals, beginning in 1832. That work, never large, would eventually be attached to the CHURCH OF THE PROVINCE OF THE WEST INDIES. In 1976, it became an independent diocese and then became affiliated with the EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

The first Lutheran pastor arrived in 1865 to minister among German and English expatriates, and a Protestant Council was formed in 1870 among foreign residents. In 1878, Messiah Methodist Church was established in Caracas, which later became affiliated with the Presbyterians. In 1886, American Bible Society (ABS) agent Francisco Penzotti (an Italian-Uruguayan) arrived in Caracas and established local depots for Bible distribution throughout the country.

Missionary work was begun in 1889 by representatives of the British and Canadian “open brethren” branches of the CHRISTIAN BRETHREN. During the 1890s, several other Protestant missionaries arrived: the Evangelical German Lutheran Church (1893), the Christian and Missionary Alliance (1895, C&MA), the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (1897), the Hebron Institute and Missionary Association (1897), the Swedish Evangelical Free Church (1898), and the Evangelical Mission of South America (1899, which established a national church body, known as ADIEL: *Asociación de Iglesias Evangélicas Libres de Venezuela*).

Venezuela was the first Spanish-speaking country entered by C&MA missionaries, when two single women began work in Caracas in 1895. They were joined by the Rev. and Mrs. Gerald A. Bailly, who arrived in Caracas in February 1897 after working for a brief period in Puerto Rico. Mr. Bailly was also a representative of the ABS. These missionaries were joined by Mr. Frederick R. Bullen in 1909, who with the Baillys founded the Hebron Home Training Institute for Native Workers (also known as the Hebron Home Institute and Missionary Association) prior to 1914, located in the mountains near Caracas. Bullen, who became the director of Hebron Institute, invited his friend Gottfried Bender (who had become a Pentecostal in 1912 in New York City) to join him in Caracas in February 1914. Bullen, who was affiliated with Mennonite Brethren in Christ of Pennsylvania, died of malaria prior to mid-October 1914. Another coworker, Henry Randall, also died of malaria in January 1916, after returning from distributing the Scriptures along the Orinoco River.

Due to Bender’s influence, the Baillys received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, which produced a negative reaction on the part of the C&MA leadership in New York. Consequently, the C&MA decided to close its work in Venezuela, and the field was not reopened until 1971. The C&MA national church body, in 2006, consisted of only nine organized churches with 1,844 baptized members.

In 1914, the Baillys decided to organize the *Confraternidad Pentecostal* (Pentecostal Fellowship) with the congregations they had already established in La Guaria, Los Teques and Caracas. The fellowship was later renamed the Missionary and Apostolic Church of Venezuela. The Baillys were joined by Dr. Van and Mrs. Gara Edding (1915-1919), who had been recruited

by Mr. Bailly after the death of Bullen in 1914; they relocated to Isla Margarita in 1917 and established the Orinoco River Mission in 1919 among their supporters in the USA. Bailly then turned over all his churches in eastern Venezuela to the supervision of Dr. Edding.

During the early twentieth century (1900-1939), at least a dozen additional Protestant mission agencies arrived from Europe and North America: the Scandinavian Alliance Mission (1906, later renamed The Evangelical Alliance Mission, TEAM); the first Pentecostal missionaries begin work in Venezuela (1914, Mr. & Mrs. Gerald Bailly and who later affiliated with the Assemblies of God in the USA); the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (1910); the Orinoco River Mission (1915, which established a national church body, known as ASIGEO: *Asociación de Iglesias Evangélicas del Oriente*); the Evangelical Free Church of North America (1920, which established ADIEL: *Asociación de Iglesias Evangélicas Libres de Venezuela*); Baptist Mid-Missions (1924); independent Baptist missionaries began work in Carúpano (1926, which later became part of the Southern Baptist Convention); the Apostolic Missionary Evangelical Christian Church / Bethel Evangelical Church (1927, also known as *Iglesias Nativas Venezolanas de Apure*, founded by Arístides Díaz); and independent Pentecostal work in El Tocuyo (1929, which later became part of the United World Mission).

Noteworthy during this early period was the development of Pentecostal work in Venezuela. Bethel Pentecostal Assembly was organized in September 1921 in Barquisimeto, State of Lara, by the Benders, who arrived from the USA in 1919 as independent Pentecostal missionaries.

Although Gottfried Bender was born in Germany in 1877, he became a naturalized U.S. citizen and was converted in New York City at an Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1902. Later, he became active in the Christian & Missionary Alliance and attended Nyack Bible Institute; he was ordained to the Christian ministry in 1912 at the Newark Pentecostal Assembly. Sometime prior to 1918, Bender travelled to Caracas and enrolled at the Hebron Home Training Institute for Native Workers, where he also learned Spanish. Then he returned to the USA in 1918 and married Christine Schwager Kopittke, and both returned to Venezuela in 1919 as independent Pentecostal missionaries to begin work in Barquisimeto. They were joined by Adah Winger, an Assemblies of God missionary, who located in Caracas and directed a primary school and orphanage.

After establishing Bethel Chapel in 1921 in Barquisimeto, the Benders and their coworkers founded the Evangelical Institute to provide primary education for children during the day and Bible institute training for pastors and lay workers in the evening. During a worship service in August 1924 in Barquisimeto, a revival erupted with Pentecostal signs and wonders, which became the initial impulse for the expansion of the Pentecostal movement in Venezuela. Bender's ministry expanded from Lara State to Falcón State, and beyond, during the next two decades, with the establishment of new congregations, educational institutions and orphanages.

Because of their need to retire from missionary work and return to the USA, and faced with the need for additional financial resources and missionary personnel to sustain the existing churches, the Benders encouraged the leaders of their associated churches, called the "Barquisimeto movement," to join the Assemblies of God. Consequently, this group of pastors and their churches became affiliated with the Assemblies of God in August 1947. The Benders, themselves, had officially joined the U.S. Assemblies of God in May 1937.

The ASSEMBLIES OF GOD FOREIGN MISSION BOARD began work in Venezuela in 1940 with the arrival of the Rev. and Mrs. Irvin (Ingve) Olson, who initially collaborated with the Benders and their affiliated pastors and churches in Barquisimeto. In 1948, the Assemblies of God

established the Central Bible Institute in Barquisimeto, which became the principal training center for new national pastors. Later, the Olsons relocated in Caracas and established a central church that became known as the “mother church” of the Assemblies of God in Venezuela. In 1946, three national districts were established within the Assemblies of God in Venezuela, followed by the National Convention in 1947, named the General Council of the Assemblies of God.

By 1980, the Assemblies of God had established 150 congregations (churches and missions) nationally, and it is now the fourth-largest Protestant denomination in the nation with an estimated 315 congregations and 25,200 members. However, a schism occurred in 1957, under the leadership of the Rev. Exeario Sosa in Barquisimeto, which led to the founding of the Evangelical Pentecostal Union of Venezuela (UEPV). In 1969, the UEPV reported baptized membership of 2,200 with 40 local pastors, 47 established local congregations and 18 mission stations (preaching points). The next report of March 1970 showed 61 congregations with 2,500 baptized members with 50 local pastors and 10 missions. At the end of 1980 the UEPV reported 3,000 baptized members, 55 pastors with 68 congregations and 12 mission posts. Beginning in the 1960s, the UEPV has had a close working relationship with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the USA.

After Sosa passed away in June 1981, Vice President Angel Bravo assumed the presidency of the UEPV for two years, but many local congregations felt a void of leadership and chose to part ways with the denomination. Others left because of theological and political differences with some of the key leaders and their international ecumenical orientation. About 50 local congregations with their preaching points left the UEPV between 1981 and 1983. The UEPV was left with a membership of merely 18 local congregations when it convened for its XXVII Convention, held August 25-28, 1983.

In addition, during the 1950s, the INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF THE FOURSQUARE GOSPEL and the UNITED PENTECOSTAL CHURCH INTERNATIONAL arrived and developed church associations. Pentecostalism also birthed a host of national church bodies between 1950 and 1980: the Evangelical Church of the Cross (1958, founded by Sacramento Cobos in Zulia); the Federation of Peniel Churches (founded in the 1950s in Valencia); the Emaus Pentecostal Church (1969); the International Trinitarian Light of the World Church (1976, founded by Capitan Jaime Banks Puertas in Guanare); the Assemblies of God Evangelical Confraternity (1979, founded by Valentín Vale in Caracas); and Ebenezer Pentecostal Church (date unknown).

By decades, the minimum number of Protestant denominations, national church associations and service agencies founded between 1940 and 2000 were: 1940s (5), 1950s (15), 1960s (5), 1970s (8), 1980s (11) and 1990s (7).

In 1960, the largest Protestant denominations (based on church membership) were reported to be the following: all Lutheran bodies (2,700), the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (2,633), The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM)-related churches (2,042), the Christian Brethren (2,000), the Assemblies of God (1,955) and the Orinoco River Mission-related churches (1,471). The total membership of the twenty-largest denominations and missions was only 16,483, with an estimated Protestant community of 45,756.

By 1965, the total Protestant membership had increased to 47,000 with the largest denominations reported to be the following: the Christian Brethren (7,000), the Bethel Evangelical Church of Apure (6,000), Seventh-Day Adventist Church (6,000), the Assemblies of God (3,132), all Lutheran churches (2,562), The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM)-related churches (2,400), the Orinoco River Mission-related churches (2,400), all Baptist groups (2,133),

the Evangelical Free Churches (950), and all Presbyterian groups (882). Obviously, up to this time, the accumulative growth of the Protestant community was not very impressive.

Between August 1998 and January 1999, the company Consultores 21 conducted a public opinion poll on religious affiliation from a sample of 1,500 cases randomly selected from cities with over 20,000 inhabitants from across the country. The results of this poll revealed the following: Roman Catholic 87 percent; Protestant 5.8 percent; other religions 1.2 percent; and none/no response 6.1 percent. In 2000, sociologist Timothy Steigenga estimated that the Protestant population of Venezuela was somewhere between 7 and 10 percent.

In 2005, the largest Protestant denominations were estimated to be the following:

- Seventh-Day Adventist Church (235 churches with 63,100 members)
- International Trinitarian Light of the World Pentecostal Church (480 churches with 56,900 members)
- The Evangelical Alliance Mission (TEAM)-related churches (900 churches with 29,200 members)
- Assemblies of God (315 churches with 25,200 members)
- National (Southern) Baptist Convention (245 churches with 20,800 members)
- United Pentecostal Church (240 churches with 19,300 members)
- Ebenezer Pentecostal Churches (100 churches with 12,000 members)
- All Lutheran bodies (96 churches with 7,750 members)
- Christian Brethren (144 churches with 7,500 members)
- International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (60 churches with 7,250 members)
- Bethel Evangelical Church of Apure (55 churches with 5,500 members).

(Note: all other denominations had fewer than 5,000 members each.)

Today, more than 150 Protestant entities – Protestant denominations (38), independent churches (63) and service agencies (52) – are affiliated with the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (*Consejo Evangélico de Venezuela, CEV*), founded in 1959, which in turn is associated with the WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE. Many leaders of these associations are also members of the Latin American Confraternity of Evangelicals (CONELA). Groups affiliated with the ecumenical Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) include: the Anglican Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church of Venezuela, and the Venezuelan Evangelical Pentecostal Union.

Other Religions

Approximately 2 percent of the population is affiliated with other religious groups, which are grouped below by their respective traditions.

Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic Traditions. There are two kinds of Eastern Orthodox groups in Venezuela, those in communion with the Vatican and those who are not. The later are represented by the Greek Orthodox Church (Greece), the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (under Bishop Alexander in Los Angeles, CA), the Orthodox Church in America (also Russian Orthodox but affiliated with the Archdiocese of Moscow), the Romanian Orthodox Church (Romania), the Armenian Apostolic Church (Lebanon), the Byzantine Catholic Church (Mar Markus, Hungary), and the Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church of Antioch (Patriarch of

Antioch in Damascus, Syria: Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of Mexico, Venezuela, Central America-Caribbean). Those in communion with the Vatican are represented by the Greek Catholic Church-Melkite Rite (Damascus, Syria) and the Syriac Catholic Church-Syriac Rite (Beirut, Lebanon). In addition, the Apostolic Orthodox Old Catholic Church (founded by Mons. Jorge Rodriguez, Chicago, Illinois) is an independent church in the Western Catholic tradition that is not in communion with the Vatican.

Marginal Christian Groups. These groups are considered “marginal” because each one rejects other branches of Christianity, usually claiming that their group is the only “true church.” Because each of their doctrinal statements reject certain basic tenets of the Eastern Orthodox, Western Roman and Protestant traditions, these groups are considered outside the mainstreams of Christianity. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York (known as Jehovah’s Witnesses) began work in Venezuela in 1936, and in 2005 reported 1,297 congregations with 98,785 members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (known as Mormons, Salt Lake City, Utah) entered Venezuela in 1966; in 2001, this church reported 210 wards and branches with a total of 89,484 members. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (also known as Strong Prayer to the Holy Spirit – Stop Suffering!), in 2004, reported 81 worship centers in Venezuela.

Also, the following organizations are reported to have work in Venezuela: The Children of God (now called The Family International, headquarters in Florida), the Light of the World Church (Guadalajara, Mexico), Mita Congregation (Puerto Rico), The Voice of the Cornerstone (Puerto Rico), Growing in Grace International Ministries (Miami, Florida), the Philadelphia Church of God (Oklahoma), and the Church of Christ-Scientist (Boston, MA).

Non-Christian Religions. Immigration into the country since World War II has not only increased the spectrum of Christianity in Venezuela, but also brought many of the world’s religions as part of the immigrant’s cultural heritage. These include followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikh, Sant Mat, Islam, Bahai, Judaism, Ancient Wisdom-Occult Orders, and Psychic-Spiritualist-New Age traditions. The major exception is the Animistic tradition, which includes Native American and Afro-American spirituality.

Buddhism. Chinese immigrants (contract-laborers) first introduced Buddhism into Venezuela in the mid-19th century, although a substantial number of Chinese today are Roman Catholic. Later, westernized Buddhist groups were founded, including Zen Buddhism Internationale (with headquarters in Paris, France) and Friends of Western Buddhism (FWBO, London); as well as Asian Buddhist groups: Sokka Gakkai (Japan), Soto Zen School (Japan), Karma Thegsum Choling – Tibetan Diamond Way (six groups in Venezuela), etc.

Other Chinese religions in Venezuela include ancient folk religion (animism), Ancestor Worship, Confucianism, Daoism (or Taoism), and Chinese New Religions (such as Falun Gong and Xiantianism).

[Historical note: Venezuela is also home to one of Latin America's largest concentrations of ethnic Chinese. The city of Valencia, Carabobo State, is home of the largest Chinese community in the nation, which hosts various markets devoted to Chinese culture where can be found from smoked ducks to authentic pottery. A local newspaper is also edited in Chinese. Also, a lively *barrio chino* can be found on Avenida Principal El Bosque in El Bosque district of Caracas. Cantonese is widely spoken among Chinese Venezuelans, especially the variety commonly known as Hoisan or Toisan, but there has been recent Taiwanese immigration, which has added to the linguistic and cultural diversity. Chinese have also arrived from the Philippines,

where they experienced persecution in the 1970s under the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and from Cuba, where Fidel Castro's Marxist government seized many Chinese businesses.]

Hinduism. A few Hindu-origin groups exist in Venezuela, including: the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON, Florida), Swami Sivananda School of Yoga (affiliated with the Divine Life Society), Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Mandal (India), Sri Rupanuga Sridhar Ashram (India), International Sri Sathya Sai Baba (India), Transcendental Meditation (Lebanon), Gaudiya Vaishnava Society (California, USA), Grace Essence Fellowship (USA), etc. *Sikh.* The Divine Light Mission – Elan Vital (India). *Sant Mat.* The Movement for Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA, California, USA).

Islam. There are approximately 125,000 Muslims in Venezuela today, predominantly citizens of Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian descent, who mainly reside in Nueva Esparta State, Margarita Island and the Caracas metropolitan area. The Al-Ibrahim mosque in Caracas is reportedly the largest in Latin America. It was constructed with funds from the Ibrahim bin Abdul Aziz Al-Ibrahim Foundation under the planning of world-renown architect Oscar Bracho.

Other notable mosques and Islamic organizations include *Isla Margarita-Caribe La Comunidad Islámica Venezolana*, *Centro Islámico de Venezuela*, *Mezquita al-Rauda* in Maracaibo, *Asociación Honorable Mezquita de Jerusalén* in Valencia, *Centro Islámico de Maiquetía* in Vargas, and *Asociación Benéfica Islámica* in Bolívar.

Margarita Island, a free-trade zone, is home to a sizeable Arab Muslim community. The local cable television outlet carries al-Jazeera as well as channels from Lebanon and Syria. Women in *hijab* work cash registers, and on most shop counters *Qur'anic ayah* are on display. Arabs are involved in retail businesses as well as travel agencies and banks. Also present is Subud of Venezuela, an Islamic reform movement with roots in Indonesia.

Bahai Faith. In January 1953, the Bahá'í community of Caracas obtained its first rented building, which served 17 adults and one youth in Caracas, plus three more believers in the interior of the country. During the period 1960-1961 three other Local Assemblies were formed (Sucre district de Caracas, Maracay and Barquisimeto), which made possible the election of the First National Spiritual Assembly in Venezuela, in April 1961.

During the period 1963-1964 many Indigenous believers joined the Bahá'í community. For Ridvan in 1964, of the 1,218 believers in Venezuela, 1,001 were members of Indigenous tribes. The Number of Local Assemblies increased from six in April 1963 to 17 in April 1964, the number of Groups increased from six to 50, and remote centers from five to 17. During the next three years, the number of believers, Local Assemblies, groups, remote centers and localities tripled.

In December 1972, the National Assembly bought a property in Junquito for the future House of Adoration, with a view of the City of Caracas. At the end of 1972, the number of Local Assemblies had increased to 159 and the number of believers to 9,655. In May 1979, the number of believers had increased to 15,236, of which 11,753 lived in Zulia.

At the beginning of 2000, there existed a National Bahá'í Institute, a Moral Education Institute, a strong and growing youth movement, a solid and stable community of believers (more than 20,000), an Office of Foreign Affairs dedicated to the peace process, and 90 Local Assemblies.

Judaism. The ties between Jews in the Dutch island colonies and Venezuela increased more dramatically between 1819 and 1821 after its new constitution called for religious freedom. In 1820, the first Jewish family settled in the town of Coro, which has a Jewish cemetery with

tombstones dating back to 1832. Other Jewish communities began springing up in Caracas and Puerto Cabello in the 1840s. In 1844, groups of Jews from Morocco came to the town of Barcelona and in 1875 they were granted permission to establish a Jewish cemetery. Also in 1844, the Venezuelan government gave the few Israelites residing in Caracas “a piece of ground for a burying-place.”

Toward the end of the 19th century, the Venezuelan Jewish community was in dire need of a permanent place of prayer. Assimilation proved to be a large problem for the fledgling community. The Portuguese Jewish immigrants who came to Venezuela by way of Curaçao had a loose-knit communal life, and religious tolerance and acceptance of Jews was not continuous throughout the country. These three factors contributed to the growing assimilation of the community and, by the end of the 19th century, the Dutch portion of Venezuelan Jewry had all but disappeared. Small Jewish communities could be found in towns such as Port Hair, Villa de Cura, Carupano, Rio Chico, Maracaibo and Barquisimeto. It was not until the arrival of North African and eastern European Jews in the 1920s and 1930s, however, that the Jewish community began to fully develop.

According to a national census taken at the end of the 19th century, 247 Jews lived in Venezuela as citizens in 1891. In 1907, the Israelite Beneficial Society, which became the Israelite Society of Venezuela in 1919, was created as an organization to bring all the Jews who were scattered through various cities and towns throughout the country together. Jewish prayer and holiday services took place in small houses in Caracas and towns like Los Teques and La Guaira. By 1917, the number of Jewish citizens rose to 475, and to 882 in 1926. Jewish immigration from Eastern and Central Europe increased after 1934, but, by then, Venezuela had imposed specific restrictions on Jewish immigration, which remained in effect until after the 1950s.

By 1943, nearly 600 German Jews had entered the country, with several hundred more becoming citizens after World War II. By 1950, the community had grown to around 6,000 people, even in the face of immigration restrictions. With the fall of dictator Pérez Jiménez in 1958, more than 1,000 Jews immigrated to Venezuela from Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Salonica, Turkey, and Israel. An unknown number of Jews also immigrated to Venezuela from other Latin American countries, which raised the size of the community to more than 15,000 Jews by the 1970s.

Currently, more than 35,000 Jews live in Venezuela, with more than half in the Caracas metropolitan area. The majority of Venezuela's Jews are members of the middle and upper classes. Venezuelan Jewry is split equally between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Most of the country's 16 synagogues are Orthodox: The Israelite Union of Caracas represents the Ashkenazi tradition and the Israelite Association of Venezuela represents the Sephardic tradition. There is one Conservative synagogue (Congregation Shalom, founded in 1990) and one Messianic synagogue (Bet El Shadai Congregation).

Animists - Native Americans or Amerindians. According to the 2000 Venezuelan national census, there were 511,784 Amerindians (about 2 percent of the total population), mainly concentrated in the states of Amazonas (61.4 percent), Delta Amacuro (26.6 percent) and Zulia (10.6 percent). About 84 percent spoke native Indigenous languages and less than 50 percent also spoke Spanish. The major linguistic groups are Arawakan, Caribe and independent (without any known linguistic affiliation to other groups). Although many of the Amerindians are nominal Roman Catholics and practice “popular Catholicism,” most are also practitioners of Native American Spirituality (animism).

Animists – Afro-Americans. Present among, but not limited to, Afro-Venezuelans are a variety of animistic groups that combine African-derived belief systems with Roman Catholicism in the Latin American and Caribbean regions: Umbanda, Quimbanda, Santería, the Maria Lionza cult, Myalism- Obeah, etc.

A new religion that draws on elements of native Amerindian religion, African beliefs and practices, and Roman Catholicism is the ABORIGINAL CULT OF MARIA LIONZA. Maria Lionza, the goddess of water and vegetation, heads a pantheon of deities and spirits, drawing strength from her association with the Virgin Mary in the popular imagination. The religion has a base among the Indigenous Cacique people, who were most resistant to Spanish domination. Although headquartered in Caracas, this religious group is especially strong in the southern rural parts of the country.

Animists – Latin American Popular Religiosity (influenced by Roman Catholicism). All Latin American countries, including Venezuela, have a variety of Virgin Mary and Christ Child cults that emerged as Roman Catholicism blended with existing Amerindian and African-derived belief systems to form a syncretistic “popular religiosity.” Examples of these are: the Cult of Our Lady of Coromoto and the Cult of the Virgin Mary of the Mystical Rose; and the Cult of the “Niño Jesús” in Capaya, Barlovento, Miranda state.

Ancient Wisdom-Occult Orders. Present in Venezuela today are various groups that represent the *Traditional Magic* of ancient Western Europe that came to Latin America as part of the Spanish Conquest in the form of witchcraft (magicians, diviners, healers, witches and shamans), as well as groups that represent the *Ritual or Ceremonial Magic* tradition: the Traditional Martinista Order (France), the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (England and France), Freemasonry (Scottish and French Rites: Grand Lodge of the Republic of Venezuela and R.L. La Esperanza No. 7, founded in the 1850s), the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC, USA), the Ancient Rosicrucian Fraternity (Germany), etc. The Hermetic Philosophical Institute (founded in Santiago, Chile, in 1970 by Darío Salas Sommer, a.k.a. “John Baines”) established a branch in Caracas in 1976.

The *Neo-Pagan* tradition is represented by Wicca and the *Satanist* tradition by various secret societies that worship the biblical Lucifer. In 2007, the civil authorities reported that “practitioners of black magic cults” were stealing bones from the local cemeteries for use in Satanic and Santería rituals, although the *babalaos* (Santería priests) denied they use witchcraft (“black magic”) and human bones in their rituals; rather, their ceremonies utilize “white magic” to cure sickness and help believers resolve personal and family problems and attain success in school and on the job.

Other Occult Orders (founded in Latin America) present in Venezuela are: the Grand Universal Fraternity (known as GFU, founded in Venezuela in 1948 by Serge Justinien Raynaud, known internationally as “Dr. Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière,” Ashram No. 1, El Limón, Maracay, State of Aragua) and Red-GFU (Venezuela, 1971, by José Manuel Estrada), the Christian Gnostic Movement (various groups inspired by the writings and teaching of Víctor Manuel Gómez Rodríguez, known as “Grand Master Samael Aun Weor,” of Colombia), and the New Acropolis Cultural Association (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1957).

Psychic-Spiritualist-New Age Traditions. The Psychic-Spiritualist Family is represented by the following: Spiritual Magnetic School of the Universal Commune (founded by Joaquín Trincado Mateo); the CIMA Movement of Spiritist Culture (*Movimiento de Cultura Espírita CIMA*) was founded in 1958 by David Grossvater (b.1911-d.1974) as “Centro de Investigaciones Metapsíquicas y Afines” (CIMA) in the city of Maracay, State of Aragua (affiliated with the

Confederación Espírita Panamericana-CEPA, founded in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1946); and the Grand Cacique Murachi Portal Spiritual Center. Also present is The Theosophical Society (USA); the I AM – Ascended Master-related Sol Ray Movement / St. Germain Grand Fraternity (founded in Venezuela by Connie Méndez in 1945), and the New Thought Development Foundation (Puerto Rico, 1987). The UFO Family is represented by the Raelian Movement (founded in 1973 in France by Claude Vorilhon, known as “Rael”). The New Age Family includes the following groups: the Church of Scientology or Dianetics (USA), Universal Life-The Inner Religion (Germany), the Unification Church of Rev. Moon (Korea), the International Society of Ascension (Canada), Ishaya Techniques (Colombia), and the Silvan Method or Silva Mind Control (Texas, founded by José Silva).

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