

# RELIGION IN COSTA RICA

## RELIGIONS AS A PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION

Although the Roman Catholic Church is the official state religion, the growth of the Protestant Movement during the twentieth century—especially since the 1960s—has led to the current situation of religious pluralism. A public opinion poll by Demoscopía, S.A., in Nov 2001 showed that the Catholic population was 70.1 percent, Protestants 18 percent, other religions 1.8 percent, and no religion (or no answer) 10.1 percent.

## COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Costa Rica is a predominantly Spanish-speaking country located in Central America, between Nicaragua to the north and Panama to the south. This largely mountainous country, about the size of West Virginia, is now home to four million people (March 2001 data), two-thirds of whom live in the fertile Central Valley. The country is bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the West and by the Caribbean Sea to the east.

Christopher Columbus discovered Costa Rica during his fourth voyage to the Americas in 1502, when he sailed along the Caribbean coast, from Honduras to Panama, and anchored briefly off the shore of a land with lush tropical vegetation, later called the "Rich Coast" or Costa Rica.

At the time of the Spanish conquest, beginning in 1519, Costa Rica was inhabited by several ethnolinguistic groups: the Chorotegas on the north Pacific coast, the Huétares in the Central Valley and on the Caribbean coast, and the Brunca in the southern region along the Pacific coast. Although there is some disagreement about the size of the indigenous population in Costa Rica when the Spanish arrived, there were probably no more than 30,000 Chibchan-speaking peoples in the region in 1502. More than half of the Indians died during the 1500s of disease or warfare at the hands of the Spaniards. By 1611, the entire Costa Rican population was reported as 15,000, which included Indians, Spaniards and mixed-breeds, called *mestizos*. Today, the various Indigenous peoples of Costa Rica number about 40,000 and are known as Cabécares, Bribri, Guaymí, Borucas, Téribes, Guatusos and Huétares.

According to the 2000 Census, the population of Costa Rica is now composed of the following ethnic groups: Spanish-speaking Costa Ricans, 77.7 percent; Spanish-speaking Nicaraguans, 13.8 percent; other Spanish-speakers (mainly Central and South Americans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans), 2.8 percent; Afro-Americans (English-speaking or bilingual), 2.0 percent; Caucasians (USA, Canadians, Europeans, Jewish), 2.0 percent; Native Americans, 1.1 percent; and Asians (Chinese, Japanese and Koreans) 1.0 percent. The national literacy rate is 93 percent.

During the Spanish colonial period, 1519-1821, Costa Rica became a nation of small farmers because there were no significant mineral resources, such as gold and silver, to exploit. Therefore, the attention of the colonists turned to producing sufficient food products to ensure their own survival, as well as producing goods for export to other Spanish colonies.

Costa Rica's exports went through various stages of expansion and decline in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first cycle was the raising of mules for export, mainly to Panama, which lasted from 1590 to 1680. Beginning about 1650, Costa Ricans switched to the production and export of lard and leather, but the major product for export between 1650 and 1750 was the cacao bean (cocoa, for making chocolate) that was shipped to Caribbean ports. The period from 1690 to 1750 saw the decline of the *encomienda* system and slavery (Indians and Negroes), the end of the cacao boom and the beginning of the tobacco trade (1750-1800).

The elites of the era were the principal families of colonial capital of Cartago, who traced their lineage to the conquistadors, and who controlled the cattle ranches of Guanacaste on the Pacific coast and the cacao producing areas around Matina on the Caribbean coast. They monopolized wholesale and retail trade in Costa Rica, and they dominated civil, military and ecclesiastical life.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a period of increasing racial mixture among the whites, blacks and native peoples, which created a growing *mestizo* population. This new peasantry began to populate other parts of the Central Valley, in

particular the fertile land around Heredia (founded in 1706), San José (founded in 1736) and Alajuela (founded in 1782), where local chapels were constructed that were administered by the few Catholic priests then in Costa Rica.

The basic unit of this agricultural world was the small, peasant family farm. However, Costa Rica was not a classless society: aside from the wealthy elite (white Spaniards) and the poverty-stricken Indians, the country was composed mainly of *mestizos* who owned their own farms, and those who farmed common lands that were provisionally made available to them. The most powerful and prosperous families lived in the larger cities of the Central Valley; they occupied the highest civil, military and ecclesiastical positions; they monopolized the circulation of money and rented parcels of land to poor families; they maintained large haciendas (ranches) in Guanacaste and Matina; they owned slaves and ships; and they controlled the flow of exports and imports. Historian Samuel Stone named this system the “Dynasty of the Conquistadors,” which called attention to the fact that most of the presidents of Costa Rica have been blood-relatives of the original Spanish conquistadors.

After Independence from Spain in 1821, a series of liberal parties vied with conservative ones for control of the government until the 1940s, when new political ideologies appeared on the national scene. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Costa Rica became more conscious of the larger world and the need to strengthen its economy by exporting goods to North America and Europe, and by importing goods to make life easier for its people. By the late-1800s, coffee production and exportation became the leading industry, and San José became the showcase for the new found wealth: new public buildings, hotels, churches, homes, parks and monuments were constructed around the turn of the century, including the famous National Theater (1897) in the downtown area.

During the Spanish colonial period (1519-1821) Roman Catholicism dominated the social and religious life of Costa Rica. Beginning in the mid-1800s, indentured servants were imported from mainland China to provide labor for the development of the coffee industry, and these workers brought their ancient beliefs with them to the New World. During the late 1800s, additional Chinese laborers arrived in Costa Rica, along with some Asian Indians and many Afro-American immigrants from the British West Indies, especially Jamaica, to help with railroad construction and the development of the banana industry on the Caribbean coast. Most of the Asian Indians were Hindus, and the majority of the black West Indians were Protestants upon their arrival. The first Protestant worship services (The Church of the Good Shepherd, now Episcopalian) were conducted in the nation's capital, San José, in the 1840s among English-speaking foreigners, who were mainly Americans, British, and German citizens.

Since the mid-1940s, two major political ideologies have dominated Costa Rican politics: the Social Christian movement (conservatives) and the Social Democrat movement (liberals). Today, the **Social Christian Unity Party** (known as PUSC) represents the former, and the **National Liberation Party** (known as PLN) represents the latter. Between 1950 and 1990, the PLN won more presidential elections than the PUSC, but during the 1990s the reverse was true. PUSC won the last two national elections, under the leadership of presidents Miguel Angel Rodríguez (1998-2002) and Dr. Abel Pacheco (2002-2006). However, we must mention the important role of Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez of the PLN, who served as president from 1986-1990 and won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1987, for proposing the “Arias Peace Plan” (also known as “Esquipulas II”). The presidents of Central America signed this peace proposal in August of 1987, thereby ending a series of armed conflicts in the region between Marxist-led insurgents and democratically-elected governments during an ugly era of the Cold War in the Americas.

The numerical growth and geographical expansion of Protestant denominations, marginal Christian groups, and non-Christian religions in Costa Rica is largely a phenomenon of the post-World War II era, which also witnessed a decline in Catholic church attendance and in the observance of older Catholic traditions. Both the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have a significant presence in Costa Rica. Other religions include Orthodox Christianity, Bahaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, traditional Chinese religions, Magic-Witchcraft, Ancient Wisdom, and groups belonging to the Psychic-Spiritualist-New Age movements.

## **RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE**

Before the Constitution of 1869, other religions were not permitted on Costa Rican soil; consequently, there was no tolerance of other religious faiths prior to this date.

The liberal Constitution of 1949 establishes **Roman Catholicism** as the state religion and requires that the State contribute to its financial maintenance, as was the case in previous constitutions. However, it also prohibits the State from impeding the free exercise of other religions that practice universal moral standards and acceptable social behavior. Currently, foreign missionaries, clergy and members of all religious groups may freely practice and propagate their beliefs without government interference if no laws are violated.

The country's modern tradition of tolerance and professed pacifism—Costa Rica abolished its Army in 1948—has attracted several religious groups, such as Quakers and Mennonites, who are conscientious objectors to war and opposed to violence in any form and who live in isolated agricultural colonies.

## **ROMAN CATHOLICISM**

### **DATE OF ORIGIN IN COSTA RICA**

1522 C.E.

### **NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS IN COSTA RICA**

Catholic affiliates were 70.1 percent (or 2,804,000 persons) of the national population in November of 2001.

### **HISTORY IN COSTA RICA**

The Spanish conquistadors first explored the territory of Costa Rica along the Pacific Coast: Gáspar de Espinosa, accompanied by Hernán Ponce de León and Juan de Castañeda, in 1519 C.E.; and Gil González Dávila in 1522. A participant in the González Dávila expedition of 1522 was Spanish Catholic priest Diego de Agüero, who became the first foreign religious worker to visit the territory known today as Costa Rica and Nicaragua. After exploring the northwestern part of Costa Rica, the Spaniards established a temporary settlement among the Chorotega Indians on the Nicoya Peninsula, where the priest claimed to have baptized nearly 6,000 individuals—although neither the Spaniards nor the Indians understood each other's language. The first Catholic church was built in 1544 in the village of Nicoya during the administration of Costa Rica's first governor, Diego Gutiérrez.

In 1569, the colony's governor instituted the *encomienda* system, whereby 85 Spanish conquistadors were assigned 208 settlements that contained some 22,000 people. The *encomienderos* were obliged to evangelize their subjects and teach them the rudiments of the Catholic Faith, and, in exchange, they received free labor for their lands and households; their servants (mainly Indians, as well as a few African slaves who arrived with the conquistadors) were obliged to provide them with quantities of corn, beans, fibers, wax, honey, salt and other products.

Roman Catholicism dominated Costa Rican life until the mid-1800s when the population was highly homogeneous and other religions were prohibited. The majority were poor *mestizo* farmers and laborers; a minority were Europeans of Spanish stock who owned most of the land and controlled the country politically, economically and socially; and there was a remnant of Negro slaves and freedmen on the Caribbean coast and of American Indian peoples who inhabited remote parts of the country, mainly the Talamanca mountains, the San Carlos plains, the south-pacific region and a few villages in the mountains surrounding the Central Valley, where most of the nation's population lived. As late as 1950, the government reported that 97.7 percent of the population was "white or *mestizo*."

Beginning in the mid-1800s, indentured servants were imported from mainland China to provide laborers for the development of the coffee industry, and these workers brought their ancient beliefs with them to the New World. During the late 1800s, additional Chinese laborers arrived in Costa Rica, along with some Asian-Indians and many Afro-Americans among others, to help with railroad construction and the development of the banana industry on the Caribbean coast. Most of the Asian Indians were Hindus and the majority of the West Indian Negroes were Protestants upon their arrival. This was the beginning of a new phase of ethnic and religious diversity in Costa Rica.

From the beginning of the Spanish colonial period until the mid-1800s, the Catholic Church in Costa Rica was administered as part of the Episcopal Province of León, Nicaragua. However, in 1850, an independent bishopric (dioceses) was finally created by Pope Pius IX, who appointed presbyter Dr. Anselmo Llorente y Lafuente (a Costa

Rican) as its first bishop. In 1852, a concordat with the Vatican was signed, in which the jurisdiction over church property and its temporal rights were transferred to the civil authorities. In 1878, the first Catholic seminary was established for training local priests. The Archdiocese of San José was created in 1929.

For centuries religious life was centered in the old cathedral of the nation's colonial capital and in the shrine of Our Lady of the Angels, both located in Cartago, where the faithful believe that the Virgin Mary appeared to a *pardo* woman (of mixed Indian and Negro blood), known today as Juana Pereira, in 1635. However, the veneration of Our Lady of the Angels was not popular outside of Cartago until the Church began to promote this in the 1880s, and she was not declared to be the nation's Patron Saint until 1926. Since then one of the most important religious holidays has been August 2, the Day of the Virgin of the Angels, when tens of thousands of Catholics, young and old alike, participate in an all-night pilgrimage from their home towns in the Central Valley to the Basilica of Our Lady of the Angeles in Cartago. During the morning of August 2, the nation's Catholic clergy, led by the archbishop, conduct a special ceremony in honor of the Virgin in the plaza facing the Basilica, where 30,000-40,000 Catholics and some foreign tourists typically gather.

Historically, the Catholic Church in Costa Rica has suffered from a lack of economic resources, as in other Central American nations, because it had to depend of the tithes of a relatively small and poor population. Even in the mid-1970s, the Catholic Church in Costa Rica was still small and poor as an organization. About 350 priests attended to the spiritual needs of about 1.9 million inhabitants, scattered among 1,100 parishes, which is about one priest for every 5,430 people. Although the Archdiocese of San José had one priest for every 3,000 Catholics, many remote areas of the country were not as well off: Tilarán had one priest for every 7,600 people and San Isidro de El General had one priest for every 8,700 people. Whereas the majority of the diocesan priests were Costa Ricans, almost all of the religious priests (members of religious orders) were foreigners from Spain, Germany, Italy and the USA. In rural areas, many Catholic priests had to attend to 10 or 15 remote parishes each month.

In 1999, the Ecclesiastical Province of Costa Rica consisted of seven dioceses and 236 parishes, which were served by 515 diocesan priests and 196 religious priests (total 711). There were 24 male religious orders and at least 33 female religious orders in the whole country. Out of a total population of 3.8 million people, 74 percent (or 2,812,000) were reported to be Catholics, according to a July 1999 public opinion poll conducted by the CID-Gallup organization. This means that the priest-to-population ratio was about 1:3,955 Catholics in 1999, which is a marked improvement over the mid-1970s. Part of this change was due to the improved operation of the Central Seminary in Paso Ancho for the preparation of diocesan priests, and of the Franciscan Seminary in Sabanilla for the training of religious priests.

In 2002, the Ecclesiastical Province of Costa Rica consisted of seven dioceses and 284 parishes, which were served by 561 diocesan priests and 192 religious priests, for a total of 753.

## **HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY LEADERS**

A number of Catholic leaders stand out in Costa Rican history, including:

**Presbyter Dr. Anselmo Llorente y Lafuente** (died 1871): the first bishop of the Dioceses of Costa Rica in 1851, who laid the framework for the foundation and construction of the nation's first Seminary; he obtained pontifical approval for the University of St. Thomas, founded in San José in 1843; and he ratified the Concordat with the Vatican (1852-1853), which defined the legal relationship between the government of Costa Rica and the Roman Catholic Church.

**Monsignor Dr. Bernard August Thiel** (born in Germany in 1850 and died in 1901): he arrived in Costa Rica in 1877 to serve as Professor of Dogmatic Theology and Canon Law at the Catholic Seminary; he became the second Bishop of the Dioceses of Costa Rica in 1880; he defended the Church against the liberal reforms (1884-1894) that were anti-clerical and sought to limit the powers of the State in benefit of the rights of the individual, including religious liberty; Bishop Thiel was expelled from Costa Rica by a liberal government in 1884, along with the Jesuits (The Society of Jesus), who were accused of "being a threat to the public order."

**General Jorge Volio** (died in 1955): born in Cartago to a wealthy family and educated at the University of Lovaina, in Belgium; he returned to Costa Rica in 1910 and served as a parish priest in Heredia; he was chastised by President Ricardo Jiménez for denouncing the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua and calling on the President to oppose

the occupation; he left his parish and went to fight with the liberal forces in Nicaragua against the U.S. Marines; in 1917, after the Tinoco dictatorship overthrew Presidente González Flores in Costa Rica, General Volio took up arms against the dictator in a battle that took two years, but after defeating Tinoco and his forces he rode into San José with the revolutionary leader, Julio Acosta, who became president soon thereafter; Volio founded the Reformist Party in 1923 and promoted political, social and educational reforms; he was also an intellectual who accumulated a large personal library at his home in Santa Ana; after the University of Costa Rica was founded in 1940, he became the director of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters; later he directed the National Archive for the government.

**Monsignor Víctor Manuel Sanabria y Martínez** (died in 1952): an intellectual, author and progressive who promoted a series of social reforms during the 1930s and 1940s to counteract the growing influence of Marxist-inspired labor unions; he promoted the Association Pro-Family and Education, Catholic Action, and Young Catholic Workers; he sponsored Catholic vocation schools for young men; he also promoted the cooperative movement among Costa Rican workers and supported the social reforms promoted by President Rafael Calderón Guardia of the National Republican Party (1940-1944); he was instrumental in the founding of Radio Fides in the late 1940s as the official Catholic radio station.

**Dr. Benjamín Núñez** (deceased): an ex-priest, educator, progressive and social reformer, who he helped to organize the Rerum Novarum Confederation of Costa Rican Workers, a labor union, in the mid-1940s; he was politically active in the 1948 Civil War and in the formation of the National Liberation Party (PLN); he served as the Minister of Labor in the administration of PLN President “Don Pepe” Figueres (1953-1958), later as the Costa Rican Ambassador to Israel, and was the founding rector of the National University in Heredia, founded in 1973.

**Friar Claudio Solano:** a conservative priest who directed the John XXIII Social School and sponsored the Solidarity movement as a peaceful form of worker-owner cooperation and as a “holy crusade” against Communist-inspired trade unions since the 1940s.

**Father Armando Alfaro:** a seminary professor and social reformer who promoted the establishment of Catholic vocational schools; he served as the director of IMAS (Institute of Social Welfare) during the 1970s, a government agency dedicated to providing assistance to poor families and individuals.

**Javier Solís:** an ex-priest, professor, journalist, politician; he served as a member of the National Assembly from 1986-1990 for the leftwing United People’s Party (Pueblo Unido); he was the Costa Rican Ambassador to Spain (1980s) and to Nicaragua (2000-2001).

**Monsignor Ramón Arrieta Villalobos** (born 1924): the fifth archbishop of San José (1979-2002) who was often criticized for being only an administrator and not a visionary leader; his mishandling of the controversy surrounding Father Minor Calvo and Radio Maria de Guadalupe in 2002 led to a great deal of public criticism; however, he did support the PLN and its social reforms under Presidents Luis Alberto Monge and Oscar Arias during the 1980s, while condemning the Marxist-led Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

**Monsignor Hugo Barrantes Ureña** (born 1952): the sixth archbishop of San José, who took office on 18 October 2002, with a promise to renew the work of the Church and the conviction that priests should spend more time on the streets and with the people in order to recover lost members and attract new members; he is perceived to be more of a visionary leader than was his predecessor.

## **MAJOR THEOLOGIANS, EDUCATORS AND AUTHORS**

Some of the major Catholic theologians, educators and authors in Costa Rica are:

**Dr. Arnoldo Mora Rodríguez** (born 1937) is a former priest (Dominican), philosopher, theologian, politician, author, and art critic; he was a diocesan priest in Alajuela (1960-1974); he was a professor of philosophy at the University of Costa Rica and the National University where he also taught in the Ecumenical School of Religion; and he served as Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports during 1994-1998 in the administration of PLN President José María Figueres. Mora authored two important works: one about the popular reformist archbishop of El Salvador who was assassinated by right-wing elements during the civil war in 1980, Msgr. Oscar Arnulfo Romero, entitled *Monseñor Romero* (San José: EDUCA,1981); and “The Origins of Socialist Thought in Costa Rica” in

Spanish (*Los Orígenes del Pensamiento Socialista en Costa Rica*, San Jose: DEI, 1988). Dr. Mora represents the progressive wing of the Roman Catholic Church in Costa Rica.

**Dr. Pablo Richard** (born 1939) is a former Chilean diocesan priest and earned a Doctorate in Sociology of Religion at the Sorbonne, Paris; he is one of the international leaders of the Theology of Liberation movement in Latin America; for over 20 years Dr. Richards was a professor at the Ecumenical School of Religion at the National University in Heredia, Costa Rica, and for many years was Professor of Exegesis at the Latin American Biblical University; he now serves as Director of the Ecumenical Department of Investigations (DEI), which he helped to establish in 1976; DEI is located in Sabanilla, a suburb of San José. Dr. Richard has authored, co-authored or edited the following books: *La Iglesia Latinoamericana entre el Temor y la Esperanza, Religión y Política en América Central* (with Diego Irarrázaval), *La Iglesia de los Pobres en América Central* (editor, with G. Meléndez), *Materiales para una Historia de la Teología en América Latina, Raíces de la Teología Latinoamericana* (editor, DEI, 1987), all of which were published in Spanish by DEI. The following book by Dr. Richards was published in English and Spanish: *Apocalypse, a People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

**Dr. Miguel Picado Gatgens** (born in 1947) is an ex-priest, theologian, author and church historian; a former director of the Ecumenical School of Religion at the National University in Heredia; he currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Ecumenical Department of Investigations (DEI), in Sabanilla. He is author of “The Hispanic American Church in the Courts of Cádiz” (*La Iglesia Hispanoamericana en las Cortes de Cádiz*, Pontifical Gregorian University, 1979), “The Social Doctrine of the Costa Rican Bishops, 1893-1981” (*La Palabra Social de los Obispos Costarricenses, 1893-1981*, DEI, 1982), and “The Costa Rican Church Between God and Cesar” (*La Iglesia Costarricense entre Dios y el César*, DEI, 1989), all of which were published in Spanish.

## **HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES**

In 2002 there were 284 parishes in Costa Rica that were attended to by 561 diocesan priests and assisted by 192 religious priests, many of whom worked in specialized ministries, such as education or social services.

All of the larger cities and towns have a Catholic church or chapel, usually located on the east side of the main plaza in the center of town, although the larger cities may have a dozen or more churches scattered throughout the urban area. The altar of a Catholic church always is located at the east end and the main entrance at the west end of the building. Most of the old colonial Catholic churches are preserved as historical monuments, whether or not they are still in use. The most important of these structures are located in the town of Nicoya, on the Nicoya Peninsula, which contains the ruins of the oldest church in Costa Rica; in the Orosi Valley there are two such sites, the Church of Ujarrás (now in ruins) and the Church of Orosi (a wooden structure that is still in use); and the ruins of the colonial cathedral in Cartago. The Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels in Cartago, a large, ornate wooden structure, is considered by Catholics to be the most sacred religious site in the country.

## **WHAT IS SACRED**

The principal religious relic that exists in Costa Rica is a small stone statue of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child that is preserved in a grotto under the Basilica of Our Lady of the Angels in Cartago, located near the site where the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared in 1635. The statue dates from the colonial era and, according to legend, it miraculously appeared on that site at the time of the apparition of the Virgin. Throughout the country in many Catholic churches, there are a variety of man-made statues of Mary, Jesus, the Apostles and other saints, which are revered and maintained by the faithful and used for special occasions, such as the processions during Easter Week.

## **HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS**

There are more than 2,000 towns in Costa Rica that are named after a Catholic saint, and in many of these places the most important day of the year is the celebration of their patron saint, which typically includes a parade of people carrying religious icons as well as a carnival of other attractions. Together with the Day of the Virgin (August 2), the most important religious holidays are Lent (40 days before Easter) and Holy Week or Easter, when in hundreds of towns, both large and small, most of the population turns out to witness a parade led by the local Catholic clergy and a group of amateur actors who portray the various personages associated with the arrest, trial, crucifixion and

resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. However, this tradition is slowly declining throughout Costa Rica, especially since the 1960s. Christmas is more of a family holiday than a religious one, although special activities are planned such as pageants and parades. Carnival is celebrated in February and is liveliest in San José, Limón and Puntarenas.

### **MODE OF DRESS**

Although all diocesan priests usually wear the traditional Roman Catholic clerical garb whenever they appear in public, many of the religious priests and nuns no longer wear the traditional cassock of their respective religious orders, even though some still do so. This is no longer required since the reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s. All active Catholics have been instructed to dress modestly, but there has never been any particular religious attire required of laypeople, although many of the faithful wear religious medallions and still make the sign of the Cross when passing in front of a Catholic church, shrine or cemetery.

### **DIETARY PRACTICES**

The only dietary restrictions among Catholics today are those practiced during Easter or Holy Week, when faithful Catholics are supposed to refrain from eating the meat of animals and drinking alcoholic beverages. However, some Catholics still maintain the ancient custom of eating fish on Friday as a token sacrifice and proof of their piety.

### **RITUALS**

All Roman Catholics are obligated to have their infant children baptized by a Catholic priest, to prepare their children for Confirmation and First Communion at the age of puberty, to attend Confession and Mass at least once a week, to be married in the Catholic Church, and to receive the Last Rites by a Catholic priest. However, the marginalized people often do not have the resources to pay for the cost of formal religious ceremonies, such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals, in the Catholic Church.

Most active Catholics also routinely recite formal prayers (to God, Jesus, Mary, the Apostles, the saints, etc.), say the Rosary, light candles (incense), bow on their knees, make the Sign of the Cross, kiss the hand of the priest, go on pilgrimages, etc.

### **rites of passage**

The basic rites of passage are infant baptism, catechism classes, confirmation or first communion, marriage, graduations, ordination of priests and deacons, dedications (public works, public buildings, church facilities, etc), last rites and funerals.

It is customary in Costa Rican society for young girls to be treated to a special birthday party by their families upon turning age 15, which, according to tradition, meant that the girl had become a young lady and was eligible for marriage; this is called a *Fiesta Quinceañera*.

### **MEMBERSHIP**

Since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and the decline of Catholicism in Costa Rica due to the growth of secularization, modernization and new religious movements, the Catholic Church has taken a defensive stance regarding its institutional decay and membership loss by denouncing “the invasion of the sects” and the loss of traditional moral and spiritual values. In general, the Church’s clerical leadership has sought to deal with these problems by chastising the unfaithful, calling on nominal believers to take catechism classes, denouncing other religious groups, and seeking to “reevangelize those who are already baptized,” according to official Church documents and news reports. Even though religion classes are a requirement in all public schools, where only Catholic doctrine may be taught, and in dozens of private schools operated by Catholic religious orders, the problem of desertion continues to plague the Catholic Church in Costa Rica and in other Latin American countries.

Sociologically speaking, in play are a series of push and pull factors, which cause some Catholics (mainly the nominal ones) to lose interest in the authoritarian structures of their traditional faith for a variety of reasons

(rejection factors), while at the same time being drawn (attraction factors) to alternative religious groups where some of their felt needs may be met and a new religious self-identity formed within the structures of a new social group.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The deliberations and recommendations of Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 defined a new social role for the Church in Latin America, that of the “Preferential Option for the Poor.” This new option led, in turn, to the development of a new theological perspective, called the Theology of Liberation, which had as its goal the liberation of the poor from the socioeconomic and political structures of oppression in Latin America, and the respect for human rights. However, this new focus tended to divide the Church into rightwing and leftwing factions, which competed for administrative and financial control of the Church’s resources and for the allegiance of the masses. For example, the Archbishop of San José (Monsignor Carlos Humberto Rodríguez Quirós, 1960-1978) refused to sign the Medellín document, which confirmed the “option for the poor,” and many conservative bishops were decidedly anti-Marxist, denounced the Theology of Liberation as too radical, and suppressed dissidents within the Church. In Costa Rica this struggle continued during the 1970s and 1980s, but tended to subside during the 1990s after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. However, the Ecumenical Department of Investigations (DEI), an independent think tank and publishing program in Costa Rica, continues the Liberation Theology tradition under the leadership of former priests Franz Hindelammert and Pablo Richard.

## **SOCIAL ASPECTS**

Until the 1960s, the Catholic Church and popular Catholic religiosity dominated the political, social and religious life of the nation. However, the influence of the Catholic Church and Hispanic culture has diminished since then, due in large measure to the dominance of U.S. influences in the region with the propagation of North American political, socioeconomic, cultural and religious values. The predominance of U.S. television programs, motion pictures, music and fashions in Costa Rican life has been the cultural vanguard of social change, along with the growing availability of U.S. and Asian consumer goods, such as fast-food outlets, clothing, cosmetics, electronics, CDs, automobiles, etc. English as a second language is now a requirement in secondary schools throughout the country, and tourism (mainly from North America and Europe) is now the nation’s largest source of foreign income. Also, the availability of the Internet at school, home, office and market place has created a new subculture of information management, with instant news and entertainment and sexual voyagerism, among other things. The Internet also exposes people to new ideas and religious options that were previously unavailable to them, which tends to weaken the traditional values and cultural standards associated with conservative Catholicism.

Beginning in the 1960s, a large gap emerged between the official moral and ethical teaching of the Catholic Church and the Catholic population regarding marriage and family life. A growing number of couples began choosing a civil rather than a religious marriage ceremony, and started using birth control methods prohibited by the Catholic Church; divorce became more prevalent; and overall Mass attendance declined.

## **POLITICAL IMPACT**

In Costa Rica, most politicians and civil servants are Roman Catholics, but priests and nuns are prohibited from serving in public office. However, some Church officials have been accused of participating in partisan political activities, and have been censured by their higher authorities. In the late 1800s, a liberal Costa Rican government expelled Bishop Thiel and the Jesuits for “interfering in politics.” However, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has not been the conservative or rightwing religious leaders who have been censured by their superiors for such activities, but rather the liberal, progressive or radical priests and nuns who have punished or chastised for their participation in leftwing causes.

Some of the outstanding social reformers in Costa Rican history have been Catholic priests who left the Church (willingly or unwillingly) because of their involvement in unacceptable social and/or political activities. Some of these reformers or politicians became involved in Marxist-led or inspired labor unionizing movements prior to the birth of the Theology of Liberation movement in the 1960s, while others did so as a result of their involvement with the Theology of Liberation (see sections 4 and 5 above).

The majority of Catholics in Costa Rica today are supporters of one of the nation's four main political parties: the National Liberation Party (Social Democrat), the Social Christian Unity Party (Christian Democrat), the Citizen's Action Party (a reform movement among the Social Democrats), and the Libertarian Party (Neo-Liberal). However, 39% of eligible voters abstained from casting their vote in the 2002 national presidential elections, which was a record high for voter abstentionism.

## **CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES**

For many Costa Ricans, 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. During the 1990s, public opinion polls revealed that a growing number of Catholics were unhappy with the Church's official policy regarding birth control, divorce, remarriage, abortion, the role of women in the Church, obligatory celibacy for priests and nuns, the absolute authority of the Pope and the bishops, the lack of lay participation in decision-making, etc. Furthermore, the moral and spiritual authority of the hierarchy has been weakened by recent scandals in the Roman Catholic Church, both in Costa Rica and internationally. Some of these involved the sexual abuse of children and youth by priests, the financial affairs of the Church, and conflicts between priests and the bishops—for example, the censure and removal of Padre Minor as director of Radio Maria de Guadalupe. The ongoing tension between Conservatives, Moderates and Liberals over the Church's social priorities, its internal management, and the need for renewal and modernization is another area of conflict.

The internal crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, particularly since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, has created a growing lack of confidence in the Church as an institution and as the "only means of Salvation," which has led to an exodus of hundreds of thousands of nominal Catholics during the past 30 years. Many of those who have left the Catholic Church are now active in one of the hundreds of Protestant denominations or independent churches, or the dozen or more marginal Christian groups (often called sects, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Light of the World Church, Mita Congregation, Voice of the Chief Cornerstone, etc.), or the multitude of non-Christian religious groups that now exist in Costa Rica. In addition, about 10 percent of the population now claims "no religious affiliation," according to the latest polls, which means that they have lost interest in organized religion in general but not necessarily that they have lost faith in God.

The origin and development of the Catholic Charismatic Movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s had a strong impact on many Costa Rican Catholics, although it also created a great deal of controversy. The visit of several Charismatic nuns and priests in Costa Rica in 1969 and later, such as Father Francis McNutt, along with Evangelical Charismatics from Argentina, such as Juan Carlos Ortiz and Alberto Mottes, gave birth to an ecumenical Charismatic Movement that removed some of the previous barriers to fellowship that existed between Catholics and Evangelicals. By the mid-1970s, the Catholic and Protestant Charismatics went their separate ways, due mainly to restrictions placed on ecumenical cooperation between the two groups by the Catholic hierarchy. However, Catholic Charismatics have made a significant contribution to the renewal of the Catholic Church in Costa Rica by opening an opportunity for greater participation by the laity in church activities, including the establishment of hundreds of home Bible study and prayer groups throughout the country, especially in the San José metro area. This movement deepened the faith and commitment of tens of thousands of Costa Rican Catholics, and led to a renewal of spiritual energy in worship services and to greater spiritual vitality in the daily lives of believers.

During 2000-2001, it seemed like the radio ministry of Padre Minor Calvo and the popular format of Radio María de Guadalupe was working to the advantage of the Catholic Church, but its charismatic appeal and fundraising success along with the growth in popularity of Padre Minor became a perceived threat to the Catholic hierarchy. Consequently, Padre Minor was removed from his position as director and Radio Maria was disbanded, which created one of the greatest crises yet faced by the Catholic Church in this century. Many of the Catholics who supported Padre Minor became angry at the Archbishop for forcing him to resign from this independent ministry, which had been founded and developed by Padre Minor and his associates using some of the same programming and promotional tactics used by some Evangelicals in their successful radio and television ministries in Costa Rica and elsewhere.

After Padre Minor disappeared from public view in 2001, the Catholic Church seemed satisfied to continue with its traditional programming on Radio Fides and in its various print media. However, the general Catholic public was disappointed and disillusioned by the treatment received by Padre Minor and by the loss of the inspirational format

of Radio Maria, which had a special appeal to tens of thousands of listeners, especially to those involved in the Catholic Charismatic Movement in Costa Rica.

## **CULTURAL IMPACT ON MUSIC, ART, LITERATURE**

Until the 1960s, Catholicism had a strong influence on many aspects of Costa Rican life, but its impact on fine art, architecture, literature, and music was modest. Most Costa Ricans are part of a tradition of popular religiosity that views Catholicism as more of a social responsibility than a moral obligation, and this worldview is reflected in their music, art and literature, which is now more secular than religious. The official Catholic radio station, Radio Fides, has a very low listening audience compared with the more popular radio stations, which normally do not broadcast "Catholic" programs or religious music. The exception is during Holy Week.

## **PROTESTANT CHURCHES**

### **DATE OF ORIGIN IN COSTA RICA**

1848 C.E.

### **NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS IN COSTA RICA**

Protestant affiliates were 18 percent (or 2,804,000 persons) of the national population in November of 2001.

### **HISTORY IN COSTA RICA**

The first Protestant worship services were conducted in the nation's capital, San José, in the 1840s among English-speaking foreigners, who were mainly Americans, British and German citizens. The first Protestant chapel, called the Church of the Good Shepherd, was constructed in 1865 to serve the expatriate community in the downtown area. Although this chapel was founded as a non-denominational worship center, it became part of the worldwide Anglican Communion in 1896.

Beginning in 1845, the British and Foreign Bible Society, followed by the American Bible Society in the 1890s, initiated activities in San José and other major cities to promote Bible reading among Costa Ricans, and to strengthen the determination of early Protestants to maintain their faith despite an environment of strong religious intolerance by Roman Catholics.

The earliest Protestant missionary efforts took place in the 1880s among English-speaking Afro-Americans, who immigrated to Costa Rica from the British West Indies to work on the construction of a railroad (built between 1870 and 1890), from San José in the Central Valley to Port Limón on the Caribbean coast. Many West Indian laborers remained on the Caribbean coast to work in railroad maintenance, agriculture (cacao and banana plantations), fishing and other enterprises; and they brought their own belief systems with them: Myalism (a syncretistic religion of African and Christian beliefs), Obeah (African witchcraft) and Protestant Christianity. In response to the needs of this growing West Indian population, the Jamaican Baptist Missionary Society sent its first worker to Costa Rica in 1887, the British Methodists in 1894, the Anglicans in 1896, the Seventh-Day Adventists in 1903 and the Salvation Army in 1907, all of which concentrated their work on the Caribbean coast.

The first Protestant mission agency (non-denominational) established in the Central Valley was the Central American Mission (now CAM International), founded in Dallas, Texas, by Dr. C. I. Scofield and three of his friends "to do something for the introduction of the Gospel into Central America." The CAM sent its first missionary couple, the Rev. and Mrs. William McConnell, to Costa Rica in 1891; they arrived in Port Limón on February 24 and relocated in the Central Valley at San José soon thereafter, with "a vision to evangelize the nation's 280,000 souls." This early missionary effort progressed very slowly and with great difficulty, due to the primitive conditions of the country and opposition from the Catholic clergy.

By 1950, at least 15 Protestant mission agencies had begun work in Costa Rica, including those mentioned previously. Five of the missionary societies concentrated their work among the West Indians on the Caribbean coast,

and the other societies dedicated their efforts to the Spanish-speaking population, mainly in the Central Valley. The Methodist Episcopal Church (now part of the United Methodist Church) arrived in 1917, followed by independent Pentecostal missionaries in 1918 (this work is now under the Pentecostal Holiness Church International), the Latin American Evangelization Crusade (known today as the Latin America Mission, founded by a Scottish Presbyterian couple, Harry and Susan Strachan) in 1921, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) and the Church of God International (Cleveland, Tennessee) in 1939, the Southern Baptist Convention in 1943, the Assemblies of God in 1944, the Pentecostal Church of God (of Puerto Rico) in 1945, and the American Baptist Association in 1946.

Between 1950 and 1985, a minimum of 28 other Protestant missionary societies started work in Costa Rica. Numerous church organizations came into existence as the result of the nationalization of these missionary efforts, as a reaction to missionary domination of church affairs, or as a result of independent efforts.

## **HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY LEADERS**

**Harry and Susan Strachan:** independent Scottish Presbyterians who founded the Latin America Mission (LAM) in 1921 in San José and who were responsible for the establishment of a variety of Evangelical ministries: Association of Costa Rican Bible Churches, Bible Clinic Hospital, Latin American Biblical Seminary, Monterrey School, the Roblealto Child Welfare Association, Camp Roblealto, Latin American Mission Publications (LAMP), the international ministry of Evangelism-in-Depth (EID), etc.

**Kenneth Strachan:** the son of Harry and Susan Strachan, who was born in Costa Rica and attended university in the USA; he returned to Costa Rica to assist his parents in the work of the LAM; upon the death of his father, Kenneth took over the direction of the LAM; he founded the ministry of EID in 1959, which had a major impact of more than a dozen countries in Latin America in terms of evangelism, discipleship, church growth and interdenominational cooperation and unity.

**Grace Strachan-Roberts:** the sister of Kenneth and the daughter of Harry and Susan Strachan who married the Rev. Dayton Roberts (he became a Vice-President of the LAM); she was one of the founders and directors of the Roblealto Child Welfare Association and the Women's Department of Goodwill Caravans, a ministry of the Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance.

**Alden Coble:** the director of the Spanish Language Institute from the late-1960s until his retirement in the early-1990s, which is one of the major training institutions for new missionaries coming to serve in Latin America from a large number of Protestant mission agencies; he was active on the board of directors of many Evangelical ministries in Costa Rica.

**José Antonio Morales:** a pastor with the Association of Costa Rican Bible Churches, who also served as Executive Secretary of the Bible Society of Costa Rica, a staff member of the Latin American Biblical Seminary, a staff member of the Costa Rican Office of World Vision International, a staff member of the Evangelical University of the Americas, among others; he was also a key leader in the Charismatic Movement in Costa Rica, both among Evangelicals and Roman Catholics; he was mainly responsible for the distribution of the Good News version of the New Testament throughout the country during the 1970s.

**Alberto Reyes:** a Baptist layman who for many years served as Executive Secretary of the Bible Society of Costa Rica; he has also served on the board of directors of many Evangelical ministries in Costa Rica.

**Dr. Marie Cameron:** a Canadian medical doctor who came to work with the LAM in 1929 and became the first Medical Director of the Bible Clinic Hospital; she served in this ministry until her retirement in the early 1970s.

**Dr. Arturo Cabezas:** a Costa Rican medical doctor who served as the Medical Director of the Bible Clinic Hospital from 1954 until his retirement in 2002, and who was one of the major leaders responsible for organizing weekend medical caravans of volunteers, called Good Will Caravans, that provided free medical attention to people in many rural areas of the country.

## **MAJOR THEOLOGIANS, EDUCATORS AND AUTHORS**

Most of Costa Rica's outstanding Protestant theologians, Church historians and Christian educators were associated at some time with the Latin American Biblical Seminary (LABS), either as professors or students.

Historically, the role of the LABS (in 1923 as a Bible institute, in 1941 as a seminary and now as a government-approved private university) has been a key factor in improving the ability of pastors and lay people to lead and manage their organizations. The LABS was founded and operated by the Latin America Mission from 1923 to 1972, and since then it has been an independent, nondenominational academic institution, dedicated to the training of leadership for the Evangelical Movement in Costa Rica and other countries, particularly in Central America and in the Andean region.

Special mention must be given to the leadership role of former LABS rectors: the Rev. Harry Strachan (evangelist), the Rev. Rogelio Archilla (evangelist) and Drs. Kenneth Strachan (theologian and mission administrator), David Howard (educator), Dayton Roberts (educator), Wilton Nelson (church historian), George Taylor (psychologist), Plutarco Bonilla (theologian and philosopher), Ruben Loes (educator) and Camilo Alvarez (theologian), Anibal Guzmán (theologian), Mortimer Arias (theologian), José Duque (educator), Elsa Tamez (theologian), among others.

Numerous professors also have made an outstanding contribution to the training of Evangelical leaders since the 1970s, including: Victor Monterroso (Evangelism-Missiology), Osvaldo Mottesí (Social Ethics-Preaching), Orlando Costas (Theology-Missiology-Preaching), Victorio Araya (Theology), Alan Hamilton (Anthropology), Richard and Irene Foulkes (New Testament and Greek), John Stam (Theology), Thomas Hanks (Old Testament-Hebrew), Mervin Brenneman (Old Testament-Hebrew), Arturo Piedra (Church History-Theology), Ross Kinsler (Christian Education), among others.

## **HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES**

A general survey of the Protestant Movement in Costa Rica, conducted in 2000-2001 by PROLADES, revealed a minimum of 220 church associations with 2,780 local congregations distributed as follows: Non-Pentecostal congregations (1,010 or 36.3 percent) and Pentecostal (1,770 or 63.7 percent).

## **WHAT IS SACRED**

In Costa Rica, the various Protestant denominations and independent churches do not recognize any sacred places or relics, rather these groups look with disdain upon such practices.

## **HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS**

Most Protestant organizations and church members actively participate in two major religious holidays, Christmas and Holy Week or Easter, but a few denominations with a strong liturgical tradition, such as the Lutherans and the Anglicans, also celebrate some of the religious holidays inherited from the Roman Catholic Church, such as the Day of Pentecost, the Epiphany, the Transfiguration, etc. Also, many Protestant churches in major cities have traditionally celebrated Reformation Day (usually on the last Sunday of October as the symbolic anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation that took place on October 31, 1517, under the leadership of Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, in the village of Wittenberg, Germany), as an ecumenical activity in one of the larger church auditoriums, which is an activity often sponsored by the local interdenominational ministerial fellowship.

## **MODE OF DRESS**

Most Evangelicals in Costa Rica have traditionally dressed modestly in public, so as not to call attention to themselves, but in some congregations the believers customarily wear their "dress clothes" for the main worship service of the week, whether on Saturday or Sunday as the case may be, either as an expression of respect for the Lord or as a symbol of their social status—the fancier or more costly the clothes, the higher their social status in the minds of many people. However, during the past 20 years or so, a new trend has appeared in many churches, especially among the youth, that of casual dress. Of course, in poorer congregations, people wear whatever clothes they have available, the nicer the better for Sunday worship.

## **DIETARY PRACTICES**

Very few Protestant churches in Costa Rica have any rules or regulations about what foods their members may consume. However, the exception are denominations that belong to the Adventist Tradition and to some Pentecostal denominations, which encourage or require their members to eat health foods or to maintain a vegetarian diet, as well as discouraging them from drinking coffee and soft drinks). On the other hand, most Protestant denominations discourage or prohibit the consumption of alcoholic beverages of any kind, including wine.

## **RITUALS**

Most non-Pentecostal churches have a subdued worship or prayer service compared to those of Pentecostal churches, which often have a more emotional form of worship, praise and prayer. Many Pentecostal churches have a great deal of participation by laymen in their worship services, including audible prayer, glossolalia (or “speaking in tongues”), shouts of praise and thanksgiving, the clapping of hands, the use of musical instruments, testimonials, dancing in the Spirit, etc. Some Pentecostal churches also practice exorcisms or the “casting out of demons” as an occasional or regular part of their worship experiences.

Most Evangelical churches practice the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion at least once a month (some have “closed communion” for adult-baptized members only, while others practice “open communion”), the baptism of adults (or those over 15 years of age) upon their confession of faith, the dedication of new-born babies or young children, the collection of tithes and offerings, the formal or informal greeting of fellow members, and some even practice “foot washing.” Some churches may also ask the “unconverted” to come forward during a worship or evangelistic service in order to “receive the Lord” as one’s personal Savior, to dedicate their lives to “the Lord’s service,” or to ask those “with special needs” to come to the front of the auditorium or to a special room for prayer and counseling.

Regarding music in the church, some denominations or associations of local churches prohibit the use of musical instruments in worship services (such as some of the independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, Plymouth Brethren and Quaker groups), whereas most congregations use some musical instruments. Many churches have song leaders (one person or a group), instrumental and/or vocal musical groups, a team of trained leaders to direct the program, or even theatrical or dance groups.

## **rites of passage**

The basic rites of passage in most Evangelical churches are public acts of repentance, conversion, reconciliation, adult believer’s baptism, marriage, anniversaries (birthdays, marriage, conversion), graduations, ordination of ministers, dedications (infants, deacons, elders, lay-pastors, missionaries, etc.) and funerals. Also, an important ministry in many local churches is the operation of a Sunday School, mainly for children, to teach them basic Christian discipleship and Bible knowledge.

## **MEMBERSHIP**

As of March 2002, the total Protestant church membership (over 15 years of age) was estimated by PROLADES at 283,350 and the total Protestant population at about 720,000. The ten largest Protestant denominations reported the following membership statistics: Assemblies of God, 46,900; Seventh-day Adventists, 31,350; Church of God (Cleveland, TN), 19,000; Rose of Sharon Christian Mission, 15,000; Association of Costa Rican Bible Churches, 8,772; Pentecostal Holiness Church, 7,600; Church of the Foursquare Gospel, 5,940; Central American Evangelical Church Association, 5,925; Worldwide Missionary Movement, 5,000; and the National Evangelical Church Council, 4,768. All other denominations had less than 4,000 members at this time.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Traditionally, most Evangelicals in Costa Rica have not been directly involved in activities related to political, human rights and social justice issues, except for those who belong to liberal or progressive denominations, such as the Quakers, Methodists, Mennonites and Presbyterians. The teaching of the Theology of Liberation at the Latin

American Biblical Seminary (LABS), a nondenominational program in San José, since the 1970s provided an opportunity for students of many denominations to consider a wide-range of ethical and moral issues, such as the violation of human rights and the lack of social justice in many countries of Latin America where military dictatorships oppressed their own people and denied them their basic human rights.

Relatively few Evangelicals outside the LABS sphere of influence became involved in social justice and human rights activities during this period out of fear of being black-listed by their denominations as Socialists and/or Marxists. After the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the overthrow of Marxist-led revolutionary movements in Central America, it became easier for Evangelicals to denounce injustice and oppression wherever found because of their enlightened Christian social conscience. Also, knowledge of the clause on Social Responsibility in the Lausanne Covenant (promoted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism) gave many conservative Evangelicals in Costa Rica the courage to speak out on these issues and to become more directly involved in matters of social justice in their own context.

## **SOCIAL ASPECTS**

The PROLADES survey of 2000-2001 revealed the existence of over 230 service agencies and programs related to the Protestant Movement in Costa Rica, which included a variety of religious and social services for the Evangelical community as well as for the general public. There are more than 40 pastoral fellowships in major cities throughout the country; more than 25 programs of theological education (bible institutes and seminaries); four Evangelical universities (the Latin American Biblical University, the Evangelical University of the Americas, the Adventist University of Central America, and the Methodist University); more than 20 campgrounds and recreational facilities; dozens of pre-schools, kindergartens, primary and elementary schools; three radio stations and two T.V. stations; one major Evangelical hospital (Hospital Clínica Bíblica) and several smaller clinics; dozens of bookstores and literature ministries, including two monthly Evangelical newspapers with national circulation and several magazines with international distribution; and a variety of social service programs for people of all ages. Notable among the latter are a growing number of ministries that target the special needs of street kids, drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, homeless families, undernourished children, unwed mothers, the disabled, child and spousal abuse, and others with psychological, spiritual and physical health needs, etc.

## **POLITICAL IMPACT**

Evangelicals have made and are making an important contribution in the area of public education, health services, social assistance and rehabilitation programs, as well as in the business community, among others. There is also an Evangelical political party with one seat in the National Assembly or Congress, although many Evangelicals are active in other political parties as well. However, there is a certain amount of political and social apathy among some Conservative Evangelicals, especially those with a strong sectarian mentality, who “are so spiritually-minded that they are of no earthly good” to cite a popular axiom. Included in this category are denominations that are only interested in safeguarding their own doctrinal purity and strict lifestyle (separation from the world), while rejecting any involvement in matters of social responsibility.

## **CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES**

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy raged in North America, Europe and other parts of the world, including Latin America and Costa Rica. This controversy pitted the Fundamentalists (or conservatives) against those with a more liberal theological perspective within many Protestant denominations, produced many denominational splits, led to the formation of many new theological schools and foreign mission boards with a conservative Evangelical perspective, and generated a new wave of foreign missionaries (mainly conservatives) who were sent out to the “four-corners of the world.” Prior to 1945 in Costa Rica, the Anglican Church and Methodist Episcopal Church were the only representatives of Liberal Protestantism, while all the other Evangelical denominations represented various expressions of Conservative Protestantism.

After the formation in the 1940s of the National Council of Churches (NCC) in the USA and the World Council of Churches (WCC), which represents Liberal Protestantism, and the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in the USA and the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF), which represents Conservative Protestantism, the various Protestant denominations around the world, including Costa Rica, became polarized between these two extremes.

During the 1970s in Latin America, the WCC sponsored the formation of the Latin American Council of Churches (known as CLAI in Spanish), whereas WEF encouraged the formation of Latin American Fellowship of Evangelicals (known as CONELA in Spanish).

In Costa Rica, many of the Conservative Protestant denominations and independent churches are members of the **Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance (known as FAEC)**, which is affiliated with CONELA and the WEF. The Evangelical Methodist Church of Costa Rica (affiliated with the United Methodist Church in the USA) and the Federation of Costa Rican Bible Churches (affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in the USA) are the only denominations headquartered in the country that are members of CLAI and the WCC. A revitalized FAEC, under the leadership of its board president, Methodist Bishop Fernando Paloma, and its Executive Director, Reynaldo Salazar (Church of God, Cleveland, TN), has unified and mobilized the leadership of many denominations, independent churches and service agencies who are now part of this Evangelical umbrella organization. Over 20 commissions are working on special programs for the Evangelical community and the general public, under the leadership of volunteers from dozens of Evangelical organizations.

During the 1970s and 1980s in Costa Rica and elsewhere, many Evangelical denominations, local churches, educational institutions and service agencies became divided between those who were for and those who were against the Theology of Liberation—not only the Catholic version, but also a Protestant version that emerged among some of the Liberal Protestant denominations—with its Marxist tendencies and alleged support for armed revolution against unpopular and undemocratic governments in Latin America, especially rightwing dictatorships. This polarization affected a number of Protestant denominations and institutions in Costa Rica, such as the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church, the Association of Costa Rican Bible Churches and the Latin American Biblical Seminary (LABS) in San José. Some pastors and educators with Theology of Liberation convictions were forced to leave their local churches and denominations, whereas some of the Conservative professors and staff at the LABS resigned in protest against the teaching of the Theology of Liberation by some of their colleagues.

A 2001 public opinion poll by IDESPO, a research institute of the National University, showed that between 1995 and 2001 about eight percent of the population of the San José Metro Area (population 1.1 million) had changed their religion: the trend data shows that Catholics have declined while Protestants, as well as those with "no religion," have increased in social strength, while the percentage of those of "other religions" has remained about the same.

However, the Protestant Movement in Costa Rica also has a "back door" problem, as reported in several public opinion polls conducted by the CID-Gallup organization during the late 1980s and early 1990s. More recent polls seem to indicate that the desertion problem among Evangelical churches is less severe now than in the 1980s, when a series of scandals involving T.V. evangelists (such as Jim and Tammy Baker and Jimmy Swaggart) caused a cloud of shame and embarrassment to hang over the international Evangelical community. In addition, some disgruntled Evangelicals decided that it was time to bail out of the sinking ship of Evangelicalism and to look for greener pastures among the growing number of Christian sects and non-Christian movements that appeared on the scene, or to drop out of organized religion altogether. Some became Atheists or Agnostics or simply opted for a retreat from any religious affiliation or commitment. Still other unhappy Evangelicals decided to return to the Catholic fold, either to ease the social tension and embarrassment among friends and family that their affiliation with Evangelicals had caused in the first place, or to slip back into a nominal brand of Catholicism where they might avoid hearing all those weekly sermons about personal morality and spiritual commitment from Evangelical preachers. After all, it is easier being a nominal Christian in whatever local church or parish, rather than living up to the higher standards that authentic Christian discipleship requires.

## **CULTURAL IMPACT ON MUSIC, ART, LITERATURE**

Evangelicals have not had much impact on Costa Rican society outside of their own subculture. However, Evangelicals have been very creative when it comes to producing a wide-range of Christian songs and hymns that are used widely among Evangelicals throughout the country, as well as in other countries of Central America in particular. Some of these Evangelical songs and hymns have found their way into the Catholic Charismatic movement in particular, and in many Catholic parishes in Costa Rica in general.

The emergence of a wide-variety of musical groups, both instrumental and vocal, has also enriched Evangelical worship services throughout the country. Many local evangelical churches and educational institutions have choirs and instrumental groups.

Also, Evangelicals in Costa Rica have produced a wide-range of Christian literature, including books, magazines, newspapers, bulletins and other print media. Bible reading and study is encouraged in most local churches, which has motivated their members to read other types of literature as well. ALFALIT is an international literacy program that was founded in Alajuela, Costa Rica, in the 1960s by the Methodists to help people to read and write.

## OTHER RELIGIONS

About three percent of the population belong to a variety of other religions, which includes non-Papal Catholic and Orthodox traditions (the Reformed Catholic Church, the Catholic Apostolic Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile), **marginal Christian groups** (such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Unity School of Christianity, Mita Congregation, Voice of the Chief Cornerstone, Light of the Word Church, Christadelphians, God is Love Church, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, etc.) and **non-Christian religions** (about 70 distinct groups). The latter includes various Animistic religions among the Native American Indians (five indigenous groups with about 40,000 people), Baha'i Faith, Buddhism (five groups), traditional Chinese religions (10 groups), Hinduism (at least 25 groups), Islam, Magic-Witchcraft, Ancient Wisdom (Rosacrucians, Universal Gnostic Church, Grand Universal Fraternity, etc.), and a variety of Western esoteric groups of the Psychic-Spiritualist-New Age movements (more than 20). The Jewish community (about 2,500 individuals of the Orthodox and Reform traditions) is centered in the San José metro area. In addition, Myalism-Obeah, Rastafarianism and Vodou are reported to exist among the Afro-American West Indians, especially on the Caribbean coast.

About 10 percent of Costa Ricans have no religious affiliation, according to recent public opinion polls.

Dr. Clifton L. Holland

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