

## **Latin America remains a Christian bastion**

*Latin American continent, like Oceania and North America, was colonised by the Europeans. But, unlike in the other two continents, the colonisers in Latin America did not maintain their separate ethnic identity, leading to widespread intermixing of races. Therefore, Latin America, though inhabited by people of partly European origin, is not a White continent. Ironically, that seems to have made Latin America a Christian bastion.*

*Christians form 92.3 percent of the population of Latin America in 2010. This is much higher than the share of 77 to 79 percent that they have in Europe, North America and Oceania. White populations of the latter continents have taken to irreligion in large numbers. Those continents have also attracted large numbers of non-European and non-Christian immigrants, thus further lowering the share of Christianity there.*

*Latin America has remained largely unaffected by the wave of irreligion sweeping through Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. It also has few new immigrants from other parts of the world. In 2010, Atheists and the Non-Religions constitute only 3.7 percent of the population of Latin America. And, less than 1.2 percent of the population adheres to religions of Asian origin.*

*Major changes in the religious profile of Latin America between 1900 and 2010 involve decline in the share of Ethnic Religions from 3.5 percent to 0.6 percent and increase in the share of the Irreligious from 0.6 to 3.7 percent. In addition, there has also been a rise in the share of 'Spiritists' from 0.4 to 2.2 percent.*

*'Spiritism' is a cultish religion of North American and European origin that believes in the invocation and mediation of spirits of the dead. In Latin America, it has gotten mixed with indigenous American and African beliefs in the world of Spirits and with mystical Catholicism. There has been a considerable increase in the number and share of adherents of this syncretic Spiritism in Latin America in the course of the twentieth century. But the phenomenon is confined to only a few countries. Of 13.3 million Spiritists in Latin America in 2010, 9.4 million are in Brazil and 1.9 million in Cuba. This leaves only 2 million Spiritists in the rest of Latin America, though they do form a considerable presence in some of the smaller countries.*

*The Irreligious are also confined to a few countries of the continent. Their largest share is in Uruguay, where they form nearly 35 percent of the population and in Cuba, where they have a share of 23 percent. Besides these two, share of the Irreligious is above 5 percent in only Argentina, Chile and Falkland Is. Incidentally, Uruguay, Argentina and Chile are among the more prosperous and more White countries of the continent. Higher presence of the Irreligious in Cuba is because of its history of Marxism. With the relaxation in the rigours of Marxism there, share of the irreligious has begun to decline.*

*Because Irreligion and Spiritism are concentrated in a few countries of the continent, most of the other countries are even more predominantly Christian than what is indicated by the average of Latin America. Latin America thus continues as a Christian continent.*

## Religious profile of Latin America

Population (in thousands) of different religions in Latin America					
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	65,142	284,795	440,470	519,136	590,082
Christians	62,002	269,201	409,346	481,102	544,687
Ethnic R	2,245	1,151	1,094	1,288	3,625
Spiritists	257	4,558	9,903	12,039	13,303
Non-R/Atheists	382	7,108	15,017	18,685	21,613
Others	256	2,778	5,110	6,021	6,855
Percent share of different religions in the population					
Christians	95.18	94.52	92.93	92.67	92.31
Ethnic R	3.45	0.40	0.25	0.25	0.61
Spiritists	0.39	1.60	2.25	2.32	2.25
Non-R/Atheists	0.59	2.50	3.41	3.60	3.66
Others	0.39	0.98	1.16	1.16	1.16

Crypto-Christians have been added to the Christians. Sources of data are as indicated in our [earlier blog](#).

### *Latin America has escaped the wave of irreligion*

Latin America has not been affected by the wave of irreligion that is sweeping through Europe and those parts of the New World that are inhabited by people of European origin. In 2010, only 3.7 percent of the population of Latin America is Non-Religious or Atheist compared to 23.4 percent in West Europe, 20.2 percent in North Europe, 16.4 percent in Oceania and 14.6 percent in North America.

### *This is probably because Latin America is not ethnically White*

This is probably because unlike in North America, Australia and New Zealand, European colonizers in Latin America have not maintained their separate ethnic identity and there has been widespread intermixing of the races. According to various estimates, only about one-third of the people of Latin America are racially White. Another about one third have a mixed European and Native American ancestry and are referred to as Mestizos. There is also a considerable proportion of Mulattoes of mixed European and African ancestry and of Native Americans, who are referred to as Amerindians. In addition, there are some Black Africans and a few with mixed African and Native American ancestry. Different regions and countries have a different mix of these myriad ethnic and racial groups that populate Latin America.

### *Latin America is the most Christian continent*

This continent, which is racially the most diverse, is also the most Christian continent of the world today. In 2010, Christians comprise 92.3 percent of the population of Latin America compared to their share of 78.6 percent in Europe, 78.8 percent in North America and 76.6 percent in Oceania.

### *There are few Ethnic Religionists left in the continent*

Though the continent has retained a fair share of indigenous ethnicities, yet they have been nearly all converted to Christianity. Share of Ethnic Religions in the population was less than 3.5 percent already at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their share declined to 0.4 percent in 1970 and 0.25 percent in 2000. During the last decade, it has recorded some increase to reach 0.6 percent.

### *Spiritists*

Spiritism is a cultish religion that believes in the invocation of the spirits. It originated in mid-nineteenth century in the USA with a couple of young girls attracting worldwide attention for their ability to communicate with the dead. It was codified in Europe by a French educator with the pseudonym of Allan Kardec. But it has acquired the largest number of adherents in Latin America where it has gotten intermixed with Native American and African beliefs in the world of Spirits and in faith healing and also with strains of mystical Catholicism. In Brazil, it has taken the form of Umbanda, a religion that was evolved in the early twentieth century by combining all these strands.

In the course of the twentieth century, various forms of Spiritism have become popular in parts of Latin America. In 2010, there are 13.3 million Spiritists in the continent and they form 2.25 percent of the population. Their presence is much higher in some of the countries, as we shall see below.

Incidentally, according to the estimates of the *World Religion in Figures*, one of the sources that we have been using for this analysis, total number of Spiritists in the world in 2010 is 13.7 million of whom 13.3 million are in Latin America. Of the remaining 400 thousand Spiritists, 242 thousand are in North America and 144 thousand in Europe.

### *Others*

Besides Christians, Ethnic Religionists, Spiritists and the Irreligious, Latin America has only 6.8 million people of 'Other' Religions. They form less than 1.2 percent of the population. Among them, 1.7 million are followers of 'New Religions'—the phrase refers to several cults of Asian origin—and 0.9 million Baha'is. In addition, there are 1.5 million Muslims, about a million Jews, 0.78 million Indian Religionists, 0.76 million Buddhists and 0.2 million Chinese Religionists. Thus, there are not many immigrants from Asia in the Latin American continent.

## **Latin America: The Regions**

Latin America is divided into three regions: the Caribbean, Central America and South America. These three are quite different from each other in their ethnic and religious composition. The regions and the countries within them are shown in the Map below. The three regions, and also some of the countries within them, have quite distinct religious profile and have gone through varying history of religious change. In the following, we describe the religious profile of the three regions and their major countries, separately and in some detail.



## The Caribbean

### *The Region*

The region comprises island countries of the Caribbean Sea lying to the southeast of the Mexico Gulf between North and South America. These include Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Trinidad & Tobago. Besides these, there are the smaller countries and territories of Anguilla, Antigua, Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, British Virgin Is, Cayman Is, Dominica, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Montserrat, Netherlands Antilles, St Kitts, St Lucia, St Vincent, Turks & Caicos and US Virgin Is.

Population of each of these 18 smaller countries is below 500 thousand and their total population is only about 2.6 million in 2010.

<b>Population (in thousands) of different religions in the Caribbean</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
Total	6,873	24,857	33,963	38,140	41,644
Christians	6,715	19,579	26,552	30,049	34,774
Spiritists	57	1,805	2,534	2,735	2,779
Non-R/Atheists	2	3,108	4,312	4,733	3,449
Others	98	365	564	622	642
<b>Percent share of different religions in the population</b>					
Christians	97.71	78.77	78.18	78.79	83.50
Spiritists	0.83	7.26	7.46	7.17	6.67
Non-R/Atheists	0.03	12.50	12.70	12.41	8.28
Others	1.43	1.47	1.66	1.63	1.54

Crypto-Christians have been added to the Christians. Sources of data are as indicated in our [earlier blog](#).

### *The Caribbean is relatively less Christian and more Irreligious*

Share of Christians in the population of the Caribbean at 83.5 percent is considerably lower than the average of Latin America. Share of the Irreligious and Spiritists is much higher than the average at 8.3 and 6.7 percent, respectively. In 1900, the region, like the rest of the continent, was 97.7 Christian. There was a considerable rise in the share of both the Spiritists and the Irreligious by 1970. Their share remained at that high level up to 2000. In the last decade, there has been a decline in the share of both, especially of the Irreligious. Share of the Christians has therefore risen from 78.8 to 83.5 percent.

### *High share of the Irreligious and the Spiritists is mainly because of Cuba*

Relatively low share of Christians and high presence of Spiritists and the Irreligious in the Caribbean is mainly because of Cuba. Of 3.5 million Non-Religious and Atheists in the region in 2010, 2.6 million are in Cuba, where they form 23 percent of the population. And, of 2.8 million Spiritists in the region, 1.9 million are in Cuba; their share in the population is above 17 percent. Christians in Cuba have a share of only 59 percent in 2010; that share was even lower in 1970 and also in 2000, as we shall see below. Share of Christians in the rest of the Caribbean is much higher at 92.5 percent and that of the Irreligious and Spiritists much lower at 2.81 and 2.78 percent, respectively. Religious profile of the Caribbean minus Cuba, thus, looks similar to the rest of Latin America.

### *Considerable presence of Hindus in the Caribbean*

Among 642 thousand 'Other' religionists in the Caribbean, 382 thousand are Hindus, who form nearly 1 percent of the population of the region. This is mainly because of considerable presence of Hindus in Trinidad & Tobago, which we shall discuss later. Besides Hindus, there are 113 thousand Muslims in the Caribbean; they are also largely concentrated in Trinidad & Tobago. In addition, there are 69 thousand Baha'is, of whom 22.6 thousand are in Haiti, where they form 0.23 percent of the population. Share of Baha'is is even higher in some of the smaller countries. There are also 14 thousand Buddhists and 40 thousand Chinese Religionists in the Caribbean.

## Religious profile of the major countries of the Caribbean

### *Dominican Republic, Haiti and Puerto Rico*

Of the major countries of the Caribbean, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Puerto Rico have more than 94 percent Christians in their population, with the Irreligious and the Spiritists forming another 4 to 5 percent. In 1900, Haiti and Puerto Rico were nearly 100 percent Christian. Dominican Republic was 98 percent Christian; the remaining 2 percent were Spiritists. Between 1900 and 2010, there has been some increase in the share of the Irreligious and the Spiritists in all of these countries, but the change is not substantial.

	Dominican Republic			Haiti			Puerto Rico		
	1900	1970	2010	1900	1970	2010	1900	1970	2010
Pop	600	4,423	9,927	1,500	4,520	9,993	953.2	2,716	3,749
%C	98.00	98.48	94.98	99.94	96.50	94.36	99.85	98.40	95.79
%S	2.00	0.97	2.19	0.03	2.21	2.71	0.12	0.15	0.71
%A	0.00	0.40	2.62	0.00	0.98	2.65	0.00	1.25	3.16

Population in thousands. %C: %Christians; %S: %Spiritists; %A: %Atheists/Non R.

Though these three countries have a similar religious profile, they are ethnically quite different from each other. Puerto Rico is three-fourths White, three-fourths of Dominican Republic is of racially mixed origin, and Haiti is 95 percent Black. Yet all of them are at least 94 percent Christian. The other three major countries of the region—Cuba, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago—have much lower share of Christians in their population.

### *Cuba*

	Population of Cuba (in thousands)				
	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	1,813	8,520	10,628	11,201	11,258
Christians	1,796	4,013	4,758	4,984	6,667
Spiritists	5	1,517	1,930	2,008	1,934
Non-R/Atheists	2	2,975	3,882	4,146	2,594
Others	10	15	58	63	63
Percent share of different religions in the population					
Christians	99.06	47.10	44.77	44.50	59.22
Spiritists	0.28	17.80	18.16	17.93	17.18
Non-R/Atheists	0.11	34.92	36.53	37.02	23.04
Others	0.55	0.18	0.54	0.56	0.56

Cuba, like other countries of Latin America, was nearly 100 percent Christian in 1900. In a population of 1.81 million then, there were only 17 thousand non-Christians. Among these 17 thousand, about 5 thousand were Spiritists, 2 thousand Non-Religious or Atheists and about 10 thousand of other religions. Of the last, 9 thousand were Jews.

With the advent of Marxist rule, a large proportion of the population of Cuba turned to Irreligion or Spiritism. By 1970, these two categories claimed 34.9 and 17.8 percent of the population, respectively. Share of the professed Christians was even lower; of 47.1% Christians in 1970, 5.8 percent were Crypto-Christians. The latter had an even larger share of 8.5 and 8.7 percent in 1990 and 2000.

Share of Spiritists has changed only slightly since 1970. That of the Irreligious kept growing slowly after 1970; only during the last decade, after the ebbing of Marxist rigour in that country, there has been a substantial decline in their share. Even so, share of

Christians in Cuba remains the lowest in Latin America. As we have mentioned earlier, a large majority of the Spiritists and the Irreligious in the Caribbean are in Cuba.

Incidentally, around 64 percent of the population of Cuba is White. Of the rest, about 27 percent is Mestizo or Mulatto and about 9 percent is Black. Spiritism in Cuba takes many forms, from the genteel ways of the followers of Kardec to the boisterous syncretic ways that combine that doctrine with various African religious expressions to achieve communication with the world of Spirits.

### *Jamaica*

Jamaica has a higher share of Spiritists and the Irreligious as compared to other countries of the Caribbean, except Cuba. There were 5 percent Spiritists in Jamaica already in 1900. Their share has increased to above 10 percent in 2010. In recent decades, share of the Irreligious has grown to a significant 4 percent. Share of Christians, therefore, has declined to 84.6 percent. Jamaica also had about 1.2 percent Hindus in 2000; their share has declined to 0.6 percent now.

	<b>Jamaica</b>		
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>2010</b>
Pop	720	1,869	2,741
%C	94.40	91.37	84.57
%S	5.00	6.88	10.14
%A	0.00	0.91	4.17

Pop in thousands. C: Christian, S: Spiritist, A: Atheist/Non R.

Jamaica was the first to be colonised. Columbus landed on the island in 1494 and brought it under Spanish control. In 1655, the British snatched it from Spain. They imported African slaves to establish sugarcane plantations. They also brought in large numbers of the Irish, Indian and Chinese as indentured labourers. Jamaica is now 92 percent Black. Of the remaining population, 6 percent is ethnically mixed and 0.8 percent Asian. It is the third largest English-speaking country of the Americas after the USA and Canada.

### *Trinidad & Tobago*

Trinidad and Tobago are twin islands in the southeast of the Caribbean Sea lying off the coast of Venezuela on the South American mainland. The country, along with Guyana and Suriname on the mainland, has a considerable presence of people of Indian origin and, therefore, Hindus have a significant share in the population. In 1900, they had a share of 25.2 percent; that remains nearly unchanged at 24.3 percent in 2010. The share of Muslims, who are also probably of Indian origin, has risen from 3.8 percent in 1900 to 6.4 percent now. Spiritists and the Irreligious have acquired shares of 2.2 and 1.5 percent, respectively, in recent decades. Share of Christians has, therefore, declined from 70.7 percent in 1900 and 69.2 percent in 1970 to 63.5 percent in 2010.

	<b>Trinidad and Tobago</b>		
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>2010</b>
Pop	274	971	1,341
%C	70.67	69.18	63.46
%H	25.16	22.75	24.31
%M	3.82	6.20	6.44
%S	0.00	0.10	2.24
%A	0.28	0.41	1.48

Pop in thousands. C: Christian, H: Hindu, M: Muslim, S: Spiritist, A: Atheist/Non R

Indians were brought to Trinidad & Tobago by the British, who annexed these islands from the Spaniards in 1797 and, after the abolition of slavery in 1838, began importing indentured labourers from India and China to work the sugarcane plantations. People of Indian origin now comprise 38 percent of the population. People of African origin form another 36 percent and 24 percent of the population is of mixed ethnicity. It is one of the few countries of Latin America, where English is the official language.

## Central America

### Population (in thousands) of different religions in Central America

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Total	17,954	67,513	111,425	135,221	155,882
Christians	17,772	66,264	107,518	130,214	149,426
Ethnic R	162	82	115	152	1,550
Non-R/Atheists	10	907	2,928	3,776	4,012
Others	10	261	864	1,079	894

  

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Christians	98.98	98.15	96.49	96.30	95.86
Ethnic R	0.90	0.12	0.10	0.11	0.99
Non-R/Atheists	0.06	1.34	2.63	2.79	2.57
Others	0.06	0.39	0.78	0.80	0.57

Percent share of different religions in the population  
There are no Crypto-Christians in Central America. Sources of data are as indicated in our [earlier blog](#).

### *The region*

Geographically, Central America is part of the North American continent. It is the southernmost part of that continent and connects with South American mainland on the southeast. Mexico is the largest country of Central America, both in area and population. Of the total Central American population of 156 million in 2010, 113 million is in Mexico. The remaining about 43 million of the population is in the smaller countries of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

### *Central America is the most Christian region*

Latin America is the most Christian continent of the world, and Central America is the most Christian among the three regions of Latin America. Christians form nearly 96 percent of the population of Central America in 2010. This is only slightly lower than their share of 99 percent in 1900.

### *Ethnic Religionists*

Ethnic Religionists formed about 0.9 percent of the population in 1900; their share in 2010 is near 1 percent. They had a much lower share in the intervening decades.

### *Spiritists*

There are only 205 thousand Spiritists in Central America. Of them, 84 thousand are in Nicaragua, 68 thousand in Honduras and 30 thousand in Guatemala. There are no Spiritists in Mexico and El Salvador. Spiritism, it seems, is a phenomenon of mainly the Caribbean and Brazil.

### *Non-Religious and Atheists*

Notwithstanding the fact that the region lies in close vicinity of the USA and that Mexico shares a long border with that country, spread of irreligion here has been much lower than in the USA. In 2010, the Irreligious form about 2.6 percent of the population of Central America. That ratio has remained nearly unchanged since 1990.

### *Irreligion has a higher prevalence in the adjoining States of the US*

Mexico, the northernmost part of Central America, shares borders with California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. A considerable part of the population of these States of the US is of Latin American origin. According to various sources, Hispanics form about



39 percent of the population of California, 29 percent of Arizona, 47 percent of New Mexico and 38 percent of Texas. Yet the prevalence of Irreligion in these States is much higher than in Latin America. Those who are not affiliated to any religion or have no religion form about 22 percent of the population of California, Arizona and New Mexico. Since the Hispanics in general do not seem to take to irreligion, this probably implies that share of the Irreligious in the non-Hispanic population of these States is much higher than 22 percent. In Texas, prevalence of irreligion is much lower and is more in tune with its Central American neighbour.

### *Others*

Presence of persons other than Christians, Ethnic Religionists and the Irreligious is rather limited in Central America. Among 894 thousand such ‘Others’ in 2010, there are 154 thousand Jews and 148 thousand Muslims, 106 thousand of them in Mexico; their number was much higher in 1990 and 2000.

There are also 18 thousand Hindus in the region, 10 thousand of them in Mexico and 6.2 thousand in the tiny country of Belize, where they form nearly 2 percent of the population. There are nearly 6 thousand Sikhs, almost all of them in Mexico. There were no Sikhs in the region up to 2000.

There are 70 thousand Buddhists in Central America, 27 thousand of them in Panama alone, where they form 0.76 percent of the population. Another 26 thousand Buddhists are in Mexico. The region also has about 50 thousand Chinese Religionists. Of them, 24 thousand are in Costa Rica, where they form 0.52 percent of the population. Their number and share in Costa Rica was much higher in 1990 and 2000.

In addition, there are 197 thousand Baha’is and 45 thousand ‘New Religionists’ in this region. Of the Baha’is, 41 thousand are in Panama, where they form 1.2 percent of the population. Of 45 thousand New Religionists, 22 thousand are in Panama, where they form 0.63 percent of the population.

## **Mexico**

<b>Population (in thousands) of Mexico</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
Total	13,607	50,596	83,226	98,881	113,423
Christians	13,494	49,602	80,255	95,169	108,721
Ethnic R	100	50	53	72	1,275
Non-R/Atheists	10	859	2,531	3,174	3,073
Others	4	85	387	465	354
<b>Percent share of different religions in the population</b>					
Christians	99.16	98.04	96.43	96.25	95.85
Ethnic R	0.73	0.10	0.06	0.07	1.12
Non-R/Atheists	0.07	1.70	3.04	3.21	2.71
Others	0.03	0.17	0.47	0.47	0.31

There are no Crypto-Christians in Central America. Sources of data are as indicated in our [earlier blog](#).

### *Mexico is predominantly Christian*

Religious profile of Mexico, the largest country of Central America, is similar to that of the region as a whole. Share of Christians in the population at 95.85 percent is almost

exactly equal to their share in Central America. In 1900, the proportion of Christians in the population was above 99 percent.

*Sudden rise of Ethnic Religions*

The country, however, has seen a recent rise in Ethnic Religions; number of their adherents has increased from 72 thousand to 1.3 million during 2000-10 alone. Ethnic Religionists now form more than 1 percent of the population of Mexico; their share was less than 1 percent even in 1900.

*Recent decline in Irreligion*

There has also been a slight decline in the number of the Irreligious in this decade leading to a considerable decline in their share from 3.21 percent in 2000 to 2.71 percent now.

*There are few others in Mexico*

Central America does not have much presence of religions other than Christianity. In Mexico, share of ‘Others’ at 0.31 percent is even lower than the average of the region. In 2010, there are only 354 thousand ‘Others’ in Mexico. Of them, 140 thousand are Jews; their number has been consistently rising. There are also 106 thousand Muslims in the country; their number was higher at 257 thousand in 2000 and 210 thousand in 1990. Mexico also has about 39 thousand Baha’is. Besides Jews, Muslims and Baha’is, there are 10.3 thousand Hindus, 5.7 thousand Sikhs, 26.3 thousand Buddhists, 11.6 thousand Chinese Religionists and 15.2 thousand ‘New Religionists’. Adherents of Asian religions together add up to just 69 thousand persons and form no more than 0.06 percent of the population. Mexico, unlike the adjoining USA, does not attract much immigration.

**Religious profile of the other countries of Central America**

In 2010, Christians have a presence of more than 95 percent in all countries of Central America except Panama and Belize. These two are the smallest countries of the region; population of Panama is 3.5 million and that of Belize only 312 thousand. Panama has a somewhat higher presence of diverse religious communities and of the Irreligious. Share of Christians in Belize is low because it has 1 percent Jews, 2 percent Hindus and 2.5 percent Baha’is besides others.

**Percent Share of Christians in countries of Central America**

	1900	1970	1990	2000	2010
Central America	98.98	98.15	96.49	96.30	95.86
Mexico	99.16	98.04	96.43	96.25	95.85
Guatemala	99.39	99.32	98.11	97.70	97.37
Belize	94.46	94.64	91.24	90.84	91.03
El Salvador	98.00	99.47	97.75	97.55	96.51
Honduras	97.04	98.73	97.29	97.02	95.75
Nicaragua	97.80	99.27	96.53	96.29	95.20
Costa Rica	99.63	98.08	96.58	96.57	95.81
Panama	96.50	92.58	88.78	88.17	90.47

In the remaining seven countries, share of Christians has declined by only about 2 to 4 percentage points between 1900 and 2010. This is because of a corresponding rise in the

share of the Irreligious. But change in the religious profile of these countries is not substantial and is more subdued compared to nearly all other parts of the world.

## South America

<b>Population (in thousands) of different religions in South America</b>					
	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
Total	40,315	192,426	295,082	345,775	392,556
Christians	37,515	183,358	275,275	320,840	360,487
Ethnic R	2,082	1,069	979	1,136	2,075
Spiritists	196	2,722	7,232	9,120	10,318
Non-R/Atheists	370	3,094	7,777	10,176	14,151
Others	152	2,184	3,819	4,503	5,525
<b>Percent share of different religions in the population</b>					
Christians	93.06	95.29	93.29	92.79	91.83
Ethnic R	5.17	0.56	0.33	0.33	0.53
Spiritists	0.49	1.41	2.45	2.64	2.63
Non-R/Atheists	0.92	1.61	2.64	2.94	3.60
Others	0.38	1.13	1.29	1.30	1.41

There are no Crypto-Christians in Central America. Sources of data are as indicated in our [earlier blog](#).

### *The Region*

South America comprises the largest part of the Latin American continent and includes Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Falkland Islands.

### *Christian share in South America is relatively low*

Christians form nearly 92 percent of the population of South America in 2010. This is lower than their share of about 96 percent in Central America. But, Christians had a relatively low share of 93 percent even in 1900. Between 1900 and 2010, their share has declined by just about 1 percent. Share of Ethnic Religionists in this period has declined by about 4.5 percentage points, while that of Spiritists, the Irreligious and ‘Others’ has increased by about 5.5 percentage points.

Unlike in Central America, religious profile of different countries of South America is quite different from each other. Below, we describe religious profile of different countries of the region and the changes that have taken place between 1900 and 2010.

## Brazil

### *Brazil is the largest country of Latin America and has a mixed population*

Brazil is the largest country of South America. Of the total South American population of 393 million in 2010, nearly 200 million is in Brazil. The region, with a considerable native Brazilian population, was colonised by the Portuguese. The latter brought in large number of African slaves to work the sugarcane plantations. Since the nineteenth century, there has also been immigration from other parts of Europe and from Asia. There has been much intermixing between these various ethnic groups. The Census of 2010 categorises the population as 47.7 percent White, 43.1 percent Brown, 7.6 percent Black, 1.1 percent Yellow and 0.43 percent Indigenous.

**Population (in thousands) of different religions in Brazil**

	<b>1900</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
Total	17,984	96,021	147,940	170,115	194,946
Christians	17,319	91,628	136,496	155,545	177,304
Spiritists	137	2,540	6,620	8,327	9,421
Non-R/Atheists	11	980	3,390	4,572	5,504
Ethnic R	500	100	150	177	324
Others	17	773	1,284	1,494	2,393

**Percent share of different religions in the population**

Christians	96.30	95.42	92.26	91.44	90.95
Spiritists	0.76	2.65	4.47	4.89	4.83
Non-R/Atheists	0.06	1.02	2.29	2.69	2.82
Ethnic R	2.78	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.17
Others	0.09	0.80	0.87	0.88	1.23

There are no Crypto-Christians in Central America. Sources of data are as indicated in our [earlier blog](#).

*Share of Christians has seen considerable decline*

As seen in the Table above, share of Christians in the population of Brazil has declined by more than 5 percentage points, from around 96 percent in 1900 to 91 percent now in 2010. This is because of the rise of Spiritism and Irreligion in recent decades.

*Spiritists*

Spiritism in Latin America is largely confined to Brazil and Cuba. Of 13.3 million Spiritists in the continent in 2010, 9.4 million are in Brazil and 1.9 million in Cuba, leaving only 2 million Spiritists in the rest of Latin America. In Brazil, Spiritism now has a share of nearly 5 percent and it seems to be popular among all ethnicities, though they often practice different forms of Spiritism. Umbanda is one such form that originated in the eighteenth century through a syncretic blending of native Brazilian, African and Christian beliefs and rituals with Spiritism. As seen in the Table above, growth in the share of Spiritists has been fairly slow in recent decades.

*The Irreligious*

The Irreligious now have a share of about 2.8 percent in Brazil. Though it is higher than almost nil in 1900 and around 1 percent in 1970, yet the growth of this phenomenon has been much slower than in other parts of the world inhabited by people of European stock.

*Ethnic Religions*

Number of Ethnic Religionists has seen a sudden rise in the last decade. In 1900, there were half a million adherents of Ethnic Religions in Brazil; they formed 2.8 percent of the population. Their number declined to about 100 thousand in 1970 and slowly rose to 177 thousand in 2001. Between 2001 and 2010, it has risen to 324 thousand. Ethnic Religionists now form 0.17 percent of the population.

*Others*

Of 2.4 million ‘Others’ in 2010, about 1.5 million are classified as ‘New Religionists’. This is the second largest concentration of New Religionists outside Asia after the USA, which has 1.6 million of them. Of 1.68 million New Religionists in South America in 2010, 1.46 million are in Brazil. Only a few of them are elsewhere in Latin America.

## Predominantly Christian countries of the northwest of South America

Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay remain largely Christian. Non-Christians comprise adherents of Ethnic Religions and of a new religion like Baha'ism in Bolivia. Spiritists have a presence of no more than 1 percent in any of these countries. Share of the Irreligious is low, except in Venezuela, where they form 4.4 percent of the population.

### *Ecuador*

Ecuador in the northern South America has a population of 14.46 million in 2010 with 14.04 million Christians, who form 97 percent of the population. In 1900, 12.3 percent of the population followed Ethnic Religions. Their share declined to less than 1 percent by 1970 and remains around the same level in 2010.

	Ecuador		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	1,630	5,970	14,465
%C	87.73	98.32	97.08
%E	12.27	0.84	0.96
%A	0.00	0.42	1.57

### *Colombia*

Colombia, also in the north lying to the east of Ecuador, has a population of 46.3 million in 2010 with 44.3 million Christians. Their share in 2010 is nearly 96 percent. Of the remaining population, 1 percent is Spiritists and 2.4 percent Irreligious. In 1900, 20 percent of the population adhered to native Ethnic Religions. That proportion came down to 1.24 percent in 1970 and is 0.65 percent now.

	Colombia		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	3,825	22,561	46,295
%C	79.87	97.70	95.70
%E	20.00	1.24	0.65
%S	0.03	0.04	1.00
%A	0.10	0.64	2.38

### *Venezuela*

Venezuela, further to the east of Colombia, has a population of about 29 million in 2010. Christians form 92.6 percent of the population. This lower ratio is because of relatively higher prevalence of Irreligion. Between 2000 and 2010, share of the Irreligious has doubled to reach 4.4 percent. There are also about 1 percent Spiritists and 0.6 percent Baha'is, but their share has remained nearly unchanged in recent decades. Contrary to the prevalent trend, share of Spiritists in Venezuela in 2010 is lower than what it was in 1900.

	Venezuela		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	2,470	10,721	28,980
%C	93.02	96.23	92.56
%E	4.98	1.87	0.74
%S	1.98	0.93	1.05
%A	0.00	0.55	4.39

### *Peru*

Peru, lying below Ecuador on the west coast of South America, has a population of 29 million in 2010 of which 28 million are Christians. They form 96.5 percent of the population. In 1900, there were 5.3 percent adherents of Ethnic Religions in Peru; by 1970, their share had declined to 1.2 percent. Share of the Irreligious in 2010 is 1.4 percent.

	Peru		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	3,791	13,193	29,077
%C	94.68	98.03	96.45
%E	5.28	1.21	1.37
%A	0.00	0.40	1.38

### *Bolivia*

Bolivia, lying to the east of Peru, has a population of 9.9 million in 2010 of which 92.5 percent are Christians. Of the rest, 3.14 percent are adherents of Ethnic Religions, 2.17 percent Baha'is and 2.04 percent Non-Religious or Atheists. The relatively lower

	Bolivia		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	1,556	4,212	9,930
%C	93.57	94.62	92.46
%E	6.43	1.66	3.14
%B	0.00	2.23	2.17
%A	0.00	1.31	2.05

proportion of Christians is because of the recent rise of Ethnic Religions and Baha'ism. Share of the Irreligious in Bolivia is not very high. In 1900, 6.4 percent of the population followed Ethnic Religions, that share came down to 1.7 percent in 1970, but has risen above 3 percent in recent decades.

### *Paraguay*

Paraguay, lying to the south of Bolivia, has 95.4 percent Christians in its population of 6.45 million in 2010. In 1900, the country was 96.7 percent Christian with the remaining 3.3 percent being adherents of Ethnic Religions. Now there are 2 percent each of Ethnic Religionists and the Irreligious in the country.

	Paraguay		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	600.0	2,350	6,455
%C	96.67	97.84	95.41
%E	3.33	1.36	2.00
%A	0.00	0.54	2.01

## **Southern countries with higher prevalence of Irreligion**

Uruguay, Argentina and Chile, in the southern part of South America, have much higher prevalence of Irreligion and correspondingly lower share of the Christians.

### *Uruguay*

Uruguay is the most irreligious country of Latin America with the Non-Religious and Atheists comprising 34.5 percent of the population in 2010. Surprisingly, the Irreligious had a share of 37.3 percent even in 1900. It seems the Church did not have much

	Uruguay		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	915.7	2,808	3,369
%C	62.76	67.75	63.85
%A	37.26	30.18	34.49

role in the polity of Uruguay even in colonial times and has been kept resolutely separate from the State. Christians form 63.8 percent of the population now. Their share was 62.8 percent in 1900. Another distinctive aspect of the religious demography of Uruguay is the presence of a significant 1.23 percent of Jews in the population. The number of Jews in the country rose from nearly nil in 1900 to 52 thousand in 1970. There has been a slight decline in their numbers since then, but they continue to have a significant presence. Incidentally, Uruguay is counted among the most prosperous countries of South America and is 88 percent White.

### *Argentina*

Share of Christians is low also in Argentina, the second largest country of South America with a population of 40.4 million in 2010. Christian form 90.2 percent of the population. This is partly because nearly 6 percent have turned Irreligious in recent decades. But Argentina also has acquired nearly 2 percent

	Argentina		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	4,200	23,962	40,412
%C	98.25	95.87	90.15
%J	0.15	1.98	1.24
%M	0.10	0.21	1.95
%A	0.24	1.46	5.85

Muslims in this period. Of 1.26 million Muslims in South America, 787 thousand are in Argentina. In addition, Argentina has more than 1 percent Jews; in 1970, their share was around 2 percent. Incidentally, Argentina is also among the richer economies of Latin America and its population is predominantly White. *The World Fact Book*, published by the CIA, estimates the population to be 97 percent White. It also mentions that most of the Christians are only nominally so and less than 20 percent of them are practicing Christians.

### *Chile*

Chile, stretching across the southwest coast of South America in a narrow strip, has also seen considerable rise of Irreligion in recent decades. In 2010, the irreligious form more than 10 percent of its population of 17 million. Share of Christians has therefore declined to around 89 percent. Ethnically, Chile has a mixed population. It is estimated that about 53 percent of Chileans are White, about 39 percent Mestizo and 8 percent are of American Indian origin. Chile is also among the most prosperous economies of Latin America.

	Chile		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	2,959	9,496	17,114
%C	96.76	92.60	88.63
%A	0.13	5.91	10.12

### **Countries with a Hindu presence: Guyana and Suriname**

Guyana and Suriname in the northeast corner of South America are sometimes counted as part of the Caribbean because of their cultural similarities with English speaking parts of that region. These two, along with the neighbouring islands of Trinidad & Tobago, have a considerable Hindu presence.

### *Guyana*

Guyana came under British control in the 1830s. Like in Trinidad & Tobago, the British imported indentured labourers from India, who intermixed with the Guyanese and now form half its population of 754 thousand. Hindus have a share of 30 percent in the population and there are another 7.5 percent Muslims, who are also probably of Indian origin. Share of both has somewhat declined during the last decade. Besides Hindus and Muslims, Guyana also has 2.4 percent Ethnic Religionists, 1.6 percent Baha'is, 1 percent Spiritists and 2.1 percent of the Irreligious. Christians, therefore, form less than 55 percent of the population.

	Guyana		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	285	709	754
%C	58.70	53.98	54.77
%H	24.91	32.02	30.11
%M	6.32	8.99	7.53

### *Suriname*

Suriname is a small country of 525 thousand persons. Of them, nearly 21 percent are Hindus and 16 percent Muslims. Unlike in Guyana, share of both has risen in the last decade. Suriname also has 2 percent Ethnic Religionists, 3 percent Spiritists and 4.8 percent of the Irreligious. Christians form only 51 percent of the population in 2010.

	Suriname		
	1900	1970	2010
Pop	76	372	525
%C	46.18	50.23	51.05
%H	26.45	16.12	20.65
%M	10.00	21.22	15.87

Suriname, unlike Guyana, was a Dutch colony. Indian indentured labourers were brought there in the nineteenth century by the Dutch through an arrangement with the British; they also brought indentured labourers from the then Dutch colony of Indonesia.

### **Smaller countries of French Guyana and Falkland Is**

Falkland Islands in the southeast off the coast of Argentina has a population of only 3 thousand of whom 83 percent are Christians, about 3 percent Baha'is, 2 percent New Religionists and about 12 percent Irreligious.

French Guiana in the north lying to the east of Suriname has a population of 231 thousand in 2010 of whom 84.4 are Christians, 2.2 percent Ethnic Religionists, 3.3 percent Spiritists and 3.4 percent are Non-Religious or Atheists. There are also about 1 percent Muslims, 1.6 percent Hindus and 3.6 percent Chinese Religionists there.

## **Conclusion**

### *Latin American Continent*

1. Latin America has not been affected by the wave of irreligion that is sweeping through Europe, North America and Oceania. Share of the Irreligious in the population of the continent in 2010 is only 3.7 percent compared to 23.4 percent in West Europe, 20.2 percent in North Europe, 16.4 percent in Oceania and 14.6 percent in North America.
2. This is probably because there has been a widespread intermixing of races in this continent. Therefore, unlike Europe, North America and Oceania, Latin America is not a White continent, even though it was colonized by White Europeans at the beginning of the modern period of history.
3. The few Ethnic Religionists that were left in the continent at the beginning of the twentieth century have been largely converted now. Their share in the population has declined from 3.45 percent in 1900 to around 0.6 percent in 2010.
4. Share of 'Spiritists', however, has increased from 0.4 percent in 1900 to 2.25 percent in 2010.
5. 'Spiritism', a new religion that believes in communion with the spirits of the dead, originated in North America and Europe in the nineteenth century. But it has acquired the largest number of adherents in Latin America. In this continent, it has gotten intermixed with the Native American and African beliefs in the world of Spirits.
6. Spiritists in Latin America, however, are confined only to a few countries. Of 13.3 million Spiritists in 2010, 9.4 million are in Brazil and 1.9 million in Cuba. They also have a significant share in the population of some of the smaller countries.
7. Presence of other non-Christian religions in Latin America is rather limited. There are only 6.9 million adherents of such religions in this continent of 590 million people.
8. Because of all this, Latin America today is the most Christian continent of the world. Christians comprise 92.3 percent of the population here compared to their share of between 77 and 79 percent in Europe, North America and Oceania.



### *Caribbean*

9. Of the three regions of Latin America, the Caribbean has the lowest Christian share. In 2010, Christians form 83.5 percent of the population compared to 97.7 percent in 1900.

10. Relatively lower share of Christians in the Caribbean is because of the high prevalence of Irreligion and Spiritism in Cuba, which is the largest country of this region.

11. The Irreligious acquired a share of 35 percent in the population of Cuba in 1970; that share rose to 37 percent in 2000. During the last decade, it has declined substantially to reach 23 percent in 2010. This seems to be a consequence of relaxation of the Marxist rigour in recent times.

12. Spiritists also have retained a share of around 17 to 18 percent in Cuba since 1970.

13. Share of Christians in Cuba, therefore, declined from 99 percent in 1900 to 47 percent in 1970 and further to 44.5 percent in 2000. In the last decade, it has improved to rise above 59 percent.

### *Central America*

14. Central America has a higher presence of Christians than the other two regions of the Caribbean and South America.

15. Christians have a share of nearly 96 percent in the population of Central America. This is about 3 percentage points lower than their share of about 99 percent in 1900.

16. The Irreligious have a share of 2.6 percent in Central America. There are few Spiritists in this region and there are only about 1.5 million adherents of Ethnic Religions in a population of 156 million.

17. Mexico, the largest country of Central America, has a religious profile similar to the average of the region and is about 96 percent Christian in 2010.

### *South America*

18. South America, the largest region of Latin America with a population of 393 million in 2010, is about 92 percent Christian. Share of Christians was about 93 percent in 1900.

19. About 2.6 percent of the population of South America is Spiritists. But they have a higher share of 4.8 percent in Brazil, the largest country of the region. Of 10.3 million Spiritists in the South American region, 9.4 million are in Brazil.

20. The Irreligious have a share of 3.6 percent in the population of South America. Their share is much higher at 34.5 percent in Uruguay, 10.1 percent in Chile and 5.85 percent in Argentina.

21. These three countries in the south of the South American mainland are relatively more prosperous and more White compared to other countries of the region.

22. Trinidad & Tobago on the southern edge of the Caribbean and Guyana and Suriname on the northern edge of South American mainland have a considerable population of the descendants of indentured labourers who were brought from India during the colonial times. Therefore they have significant presence of Hindus and Muslims.

23. Hindus form 30 percent of the population of Guyana, 21 percent of Suriname and 24 percent of Trinidad & Tobago. Muslims, who are also probably of Indian origin, have a share of 7.5 percent in Guyana, 15.9 percent in Suriname and 6.4 percent in Trinidad & Tobago.

24. There are few adherents of Asian religions in other parts of the continent.

*Less White more Christian*

25. It is indeed ironic that the submergence of the White identity in the ethnic mixing that took place in Latin America has led to the preservation of Christian faith making the continent a bastion of Christianity in the modern world.

Maps of the distribution of the Irreligious and the Spiritists



# LATIN AMERICA SPIRITISTS, 2010

Each dot represents 10,000 Spiritists

