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## **Cuba**

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Christianity is the historically predominant religious tradition in Cuba, although Cubans have generally seen lower affiliation and activity in religious practices compared to the rest of Latin America. In contemporary Cuba, religion exists in a dialectical, multidimensional relationship with the political, social and lived realities of the Cuban revolution. Since 1959 and the rise of Fidel Castro to power, the revolution has formed the immediate political, social and cultural context within which both institutional religious organisations and religious Cubans have navigated their identities and lives. Alongside Christianity, small Islamic, Jewish and Chinese religious communities subsist on the island.

Following the establishment of the socialist state and Communism as the ideological foundation of the revolution in the early 1960s, Christianity came into conflict with the revolutionary regime. Religious communities experienced varying levels of confrontations and tension with the State. Experiences of discrimination based on religious beliefs and public participation in religious practices prevailed particularly in the early stages of the revolution. The State limited the public life of religious communities, controlled religious expression and excluded religious institutions from national media and education. Known practitioners of Christian faith experienced discrimination in their educational and professional trajectories.

As a result of state-sanctioned atheism and social polarization, large numbers of contemporary Cubans have experienced alienation from religious traditions, either by choice or by circumstance. Until 1991, Cuba was a constitutionally atheist state with an officially sanctioned materialistic worldview in which religion played a role of marginalized otherness that was excluded from the all-encompassing framework of the revolution, ideal citizenry and public participation. Following the economic hardship experienced on the island after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent ideological and existential crisis, the emerging societal and charitable dimensions of institutional Christianity paved the way for a gradual increase in the public visibility and influence of religion in Cuban society.

In contemporary Cuba, the revolution is understood as an ongoing, dynamic process that continues to provide the frameworks for socio-political, economic and cultural life. A special department in the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party called the Oficina de Atención a Asuntos Religiosos (Office of Religious Affairs) manages and oversees the organisational activities of religious institutions in society. Representatives of the administration are present in each province, and they work on local matters of state-religion affairs. The office is in charge of, for instance, granting permits for establishing premises for religious activities and travel permits to and from Cuba for religious purposes. In 2019, the Catholic Church inaugurated the first new church buildings constructed since 1959.

Contemporary Christian communities bear witness to the complex experiences of living in socialist Cuba as believers, with a significant representation by the first generations of the revolutionary period that continue to actively participate in both religious and social life on the island. The role of women is important both for sustaining religiosity and religious prac-

tices in the domestic sphere and for assuming active agency in the daily life of religious communities. In the lived experience of the nation, religious identification continues to contribute to the myriad of personal and collective narratives of everyday life in the socialist society.

In the twenty-first century, Christian communities as a whole strive to establish more structures and channels for religious agency in Cuban society. A significant factor in the Cuban religious landscape is the exodus of Cubans from the island both historically and at present. The patterns of migration continue to shape the composition of religious communities and their activities, pastoral work and theological characteristics. In social discourse, religious institutions attempt to assume stronger and more visible roles as representatives of civil society and non-governmental agents in Cuba. Alongside the evolving relationship of religious groups and the State, Christian communities engage in self-determination and self-reflection on the role of religion in contemporary Cuba.

### **Catholicism in Cuba**

Catholicism is the majority Christian tradition of Cuba. The character of Cuban Catholicism is culturally prevalent through its link to the historical development of national identity and popular expression during the colonial period of Cuba's history.

The Catholic Church in Cuba consists of 11 dioceses, three of which hold the title of archdiocese. The Archbishop of Havana, Juan García Rodríguez, was appointed Cardinal in 2019 and became a member of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America in 2020. On the island, two seminaries assume the responsibility of training new priests as the Church continues to struggle with a lack of clergy, especially in rural areas. In eastern Cuba, the diocesan seminary prepares the area's aspirants for studies in the national seminary, Seminario San Carlos y San Ambrosio, located near the capital city Havana.

The contemporary theology of the Cuban Church reflects both the geographical and cultural position of Cuba as a country as well as the local circumstances on the island. By its character and self-identification, the Cuban Church has placed itself between European and Latin American theology within modern Catholicism, experiencing both inclusion in and isolation from the global Catholic community. Although the Church has consciously reoriented itself away from a historically European, colonial Church toward a distinctively Cuban Church that interacts with Latin American theology, it has not employed liberation theology as an institutionally appraised theological framework.

The key events in the history of the Cuban Catholic Church for the twenty-first century reflect the long-evolving process of theological self-definition and reorientation in the distinctively Cuban context. The REC (Reflexión Eclesial Cubana, or Cuban Ecclesial Reflection) and ENEC (Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano, or Cuban National Ecclesial Meeting) processes in the first half of the 1980s set the continuing theological and pastoral frameworks for the Cuban Church in alignment with Vatican II and contributed to the emergence of the Church in Cuban society with renewed social consciousness and commitment. The processes enabled the Church to establish a dialogue with the government and to present itself as a Cuban Church for the Cuban people. The work of implementing the council's ecclesiological, liturgical, pastoral and socio-ethical principles continues in the present.

The exclusion of religion from the public, societal and civic spheres of the socialist society has resulted in a mismatched development of Catholic social doctrine, pastoral work and liturgical life. While liturgical renewal has been implemented swiftly, revising the teaching on

contemporary social conditions and ethics has taken considerably longer. Since the 1990s, the Catholic Church has increasingly engaged in discourses on the social and economic conditions on the island, including criticism of the economic embargo on Cuba by the United States, and the effects of migration from the island on the nation and its socio-cultural prospects. Commitment to the experience-based theological method of see-judge-act, which was affirmed as the Church's theological framework in the early 1980s, continues to place lived reality at the centre of the Church's theological and pastoral focus.

An ongoing theological emphasis of the Cuban Church is the articulation of missionary self-understanding. In daily activities on the diocesan and local levels, this orientation materializes in the expansion of evangelization into rural areas of the island. A particularly vital locus of religious activity is the mission houses, *casas de misión*: private homes of laypeople in which all age groups of the local communities gather for worship and formation. Since rural areas, in particular, suffer from a lack of priests, laypeople and members of religious orders assume significant responsibility for liturgical and pastoral activities as well. They also actively organise educational campaigns from the provincial centres to the rural countryside, providing evangelization and teaching in areas that do not have a consistent presence of ordained religious personnel. Women in religious orders and laity are key actors in local communities in both rural and urban settings.

Large numbers of formerly practising Catholics, most of them working-age adults, left the Church either through the waves of emigration or by integration in the revolutionary framework of life. The fluctuation, together with State-enforced atheism, has resulted in the decline of religious agency, the consequences of which are still felt as a cross-generational alienation from institutional religious participation. From the perspective of the Church, the generational gaps among Cuban Catholics have emphasised the urgency of the religious formation of minors and recapturing the attention of adults. Migration is a continuing reality in Cuban Catholicism, contributing to the creation of the Cuban diaspora with its transnational religious presence, most affluent in the United States, where religion, national identity and politics have become intertwined in the Cuban-American identity.

In Cuba, Catholicism represents a rare transnational presence from within. As a sign of the global nature of Catholicism, Cuba has received visits from three successive popes: John Paul II in 1998, Benedict XVI in 2012 and Francis in 2015, each marking distinctive chapters in Cuban Church–State relations as well. The papal interventions testify to the role the Holy See has assumed in negotiating Cuban Church–State relations from a diplomatic perspective, further reinforced by the uninterrupted diplomatic relations between Cuba and the Holy See. During the papacy of Francis, the role of the Holy See in Cuba has appeared more openly geopolitical: the Catholic Church intervened in, for instance, the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States in 2014. Havana's former archbishop, Cardinal Jaime Ortega (1936–2019), actively participated in the process as an intermediary between Cuba, the United States and the Vatican.

During the papacy of Pope Francis, the Cuban Church has experienced a period of increasing public visibility and growing influence in civil society. The growing number of mobile phones and internet connections on the island also contributes to the public participation of the Catholic Church: numerous national offices, dioceses, publications and religious actors employ social media in their communication strategies. The increasing availability of the internet also enables religious groups to foster contacts and communication with the global Christian community in new, more coherent ways and to participate in online discourses on

religion in contemporary Cuban society. A significant advance in the online presence of the Church was witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020.

Catholicism and the institutional Church remain potent agents in Cuban civil society, often providing services otherwise unavailable on the island, such as training for entrepreneurship and professional workshops. Recurring topics of advocacy with the Cuban government also include the conditions and the release of political prisoners, the economy, and inequality in Cuban society. Alongside national and diocesan structures for charity, Caritas Cuba assumes significant responsibilities in charitable work by representing one of the few international organisations permanently present on the island. Among the prospects and challenges on which the Catholic Church continues to negotiate with the Cuban State are systematic access to national mass media and an established role of public religious education. In the spring of 2020, the Church was allowed by the government to broadcast worship services and pastoral messages on television and radio due to the COVID-19 pandemic, after a campaign by the Church to promote the visibility of religion in Cuban state media.

### **Other Christian Churches and Communities**

The established minority churches on the island currently include Adventist, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian communities. Pentecostalism is represented by the Assemblies of God, while the Greek Orthodox Church consists of a small community located mainly in Havana. The Metropolitan Community Church advocates for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community on the island. Generally, information on the volume and structure of smaller religious groups remains within the communities.

The historical roots of Protestant churches on the island are located mainly in the United States and the period of continuous Cuba-United States exchange in economic, cultural and social relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the revolution dissolved much of the direct North American presence in ecclesial life, Protestant churches, too, experienced a revival in the early 1990s as a consequence of the political and economic changes and the newly assumed role of Christian churches as charitable agents in society. More recently, the brief thaw in political and diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States in 2014 shortly established Cuba as a potential missionary field from the perspective of several Protestant churches in the United States.

On the island the Consejo de Iglesias is an umbrella organisation for Protestant churches, providing space for inter-ecclesial encounters and dialogue. The member churches of the council include, among others, the Methodist, Lutheran, and Baptist churches as well as several Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. In the town of Matanzas, Seminario Evangélico de Teología operates as an ecumenical pastoral training centre for more than a dozen Protestant denominations, providing education and training for both pastors and lay leaders. The primary international affiliations of the seminary are with Protestant organisations in Latin America and the United States. It is also affiliated with the World Council of Churches. The first Lutheran church in Cuba joined the Lutheran World Federation in 2019. In many of the Protestant churches, women assume considerable responsibility and leadership in both ordained ministry and the laity. Among the globally recognised, influential Christian leaders of Cuban Protestantism is Ofelia Ortega, the first Presbyterian woman ordained in Cuba.

In the town of Cardenas, near Matanzas, the Centro Cristiano de Reflexión y Diálogo – Cuba brings together Protestant churches for education, dialogue and social agency. Through the centre, churches actively participate in social work through food charity, healthcare and

agriculture, for instance, and maintain an established institutional role in Cuban civil society. This includes working relations with the Cuban State as well as a long-standing network of international collaboration, mainly with European diplomatic and ecclesial actors. The Protestant churches participate actively in socio-political discourse. For instance, in 2018–19, several Protestant churches as well as the Catholic Church assumed authority to comment on and to influence the process of drafting the new constitution in Cuba.

### **Spirituality, Culture and Society**

A central figure of Cuban spirituality is La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, Cuba's Catholic patron saint, who embodies a strong historical connection to the national identity of Cubans. In the village of El Cobre, the effigy of the Virgin is housed in the basilica and serves as a site of pilgrimage, representing a nationally recognised site of heritage and identity for Cubans regardless of denominational and political affiliations. Devotion to the Virgin connects the historical roots of colonial Catholicism, religiosity and spirituality as dimensions of *la Cubanidad* (Cubanness) to the dynamics of race, class and gender. Public devotion to La Virgen, manifested throughout the island on 8 September in particular, is also connected to patriotism and national identity. Through the role ascribed to the Virgin as a unifying maternal figure, faith and culture remain intertwined in the lived reality of Cubans, moving in between religious traditions and institutional religious doctrine as an emblem of sustained religiosity in the post-socialist state.

A similar phenomenon of sustained yet fluid spirituality can be seen in the expressions and practices of *religiosidad popular*, grassroots-level Catholic devotional piety in Cuba. Among the powerful local expressions of popular devotion is the cult of San Lazaro, which gathers thousands of Cubans each month to the national shrine on the outskirts of Havana. Similarly, the annual feast day of La Virgen de Regla draws a large crowd to display religiosity in the streets. These expressions are also connected to the most rapidly growing religious tradition of the twenty-first century in Cuba: Santería, as it is generally called on the island, an Afro-Caribbean religious tradition that originates from the African Yoruba religion.

In Cuba, the Yoruba/Santería tradition intersects with Catholicism in both its belief system and practices. The merging daily expressions of Catholicism and Santería are visible on the streets of Cuban towns, in public spaces such as parks and graveyards, and in private homes. Central for Santería's practitioners is the following and worshipping of orishas, divine beings that take care of the world. Orishas are associated with Catholic saints, which contributes to the merging of the two devotional traditions. The practice of Santería in Cuba often also entails an exchange from one tradition to another, such as baptising children and attending Catholic Mass while practising Santería in more domestic spheres of individual life. As the intersecting spaces of Santería and Christian religious traditions are both the homes and streets, lived religiosity fluidly crosses the boundaries of more institutional forms of religious identification.

For Christian communities on the island, the marginalization of religion from the socialist society has contributed to a strong focus on worship, devotional spirituality and an intra-ecclesial emphasis of pastoral work. The experience has resulted in, on the one hand, the privatization of religion and spirituality and, on the other, the high significance of the religious community, *la comunidad*, as the locus of religious practice and expression. The focus on a strongly communitarian dimension of faith can be seen as a shared feature of Christianity in Cuba, characteristic of all religious communities.

In pastoral and liturgical life, Christian communities in Cuba often cultivate their practices with scarce human and material resources. Through the waves of emigration, Cuban spirituality has been marked by a sense of the dualistic presence of religion *aquí y allá* (here and there): religious Cubans on the island and in the diaspora, and a transnational sense of belonging and exchange through religious identification. For the future, a collective aspiration of Christian communities in Cuba is to gain a stronger public foothold, with increasing economic resources, and to engage in social discourse on the island. At the same time, another future task is to develop and deepen ecumenical dialogue and cooperation among the Christian communities on the island.

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