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**Paper 5:** "Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Central America: An Historical Perspective"  
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**Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Central America:  
An Historical Perspective**

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**Abstract**

This paper describes the current situation of ethnic and religious diversity in Central America based on the author's extensive fieldwork during the past 33 years in the region, in addition to published and unpublished documents (including public opinion polls) and, more recently, on Internet resources. We will describe the historical development of the ethnolinguistical and religious groups that inhabit the region and examine their place in modern society.

The complexity of cultures and religions in the region began with the arrival of Spanish colonists and missionaries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and developed through a long period of adaptation and change, assimilation, rebellion and resistance to European colonization and domination. This complicated social process continued with the immigration of new ethnic and religious groups after Independence from Spain in 1821. For the next 120 years the Roman Catholic Church maintained its dominant role in Central American society, but its hegemony was slowly eroded by the growth and development of religious minorities, especially of the Protestant variety during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The well-documented shift in religious affiliation since 1960, away from the Roman Catholic Church and toward Evangelical groups, has led Dr. Charles Denton (president of the CID-Gallup research group in Costa Rica) to project that by the year 2025 more than 50% of all Central Americans will be Protestants if the current trend continues.

In addition to Protestant growth in the region, there has also been a significant increase in those who identify with Marginal Christian groups (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Light of the World Church, etc.), non-Christian groups (more than 100 are known to exist in the region) and with the category "No Religion" (more than 10% of the population in some countries).

# Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Central America: An Historical Perspective

by Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES  
(last modified on August 6, 2005)

## Introduction

The region known today as “Central America” historically has included only five countries that formerly were part of the Central America Union (1821-1839) established after the region declared itself independent from the Vice Royalty of New Spain, centered in Mexico City, which received its authority from the Spanish Crown. The five countries are Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Despite their geographical location in the Central American region, the nations of Panama and Belize have had separate histories and have only recently begun to participate politically, economically and socially as an integral part of Central America. At the time of independence from Spain in 1821, Panama was a province of Colombia and only became independent from Colombia in 1903, under the military protection of the U.S. government. The former colony of British Honduras is now the independent nation of Belize (since 1981) and only in recent years has the Guatemalan government given up its claims to Belizean territory.

Today, each country of the region has a different mixture of ethnic and religious variables, which are difficult to understand by those who are unfamiliar with the historical development of Central America and the unique characteristics of each country.

During the past 33 years that I have lived and worked in this region, I have acquired a great deal of knowledge and experience as a social scientist (with formal training in cultural anthropology and church history) about the region and each of its component parts. I have done extensive fieldwork in each country and I am familiar with the available literature on the region, especially in terms of its ethnic and religious diversity but also regarding its socioeconomic and political development. I am the founder and current director of the Latin American Socio-Religious Studies Program (known as PROLADES in Spanish) in San José, Costa Rica, where I have lived since 1972. Currently, I also serve as director of the Institute for Socio-Religious Studies (IDES) at the Evangelical University of the Americas (UNELA), where I have been a professor of social sciences, urban studies and missiology (the science of the Christian mission) since 1982 (under the Missiological Institute of the Americas, IMDELA). For the past 10 years I have been the editor of the monthly news journal, *Mesoamerica*, published by the Institute for Central American Studies (ICAS) in San José, Costa Rica ([www.mesoamericaonline.net](http://www.mesoamericaonline.net)), which is dedicated to the cause of peace, justice, and the well being of the people and land of Central America.

The information and analysis that follows is my contribution to a greater understanding of the historical and current realities of the Central American region for the members and friends of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

## Ethnic and Religious Diversity during the Spanish Colonial Period: 1492-1821

Since the arrival of Spanish colonists in the Central American region early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent emergence of the “cosmic race” – called **Mestizos** (the interbreeding of male Spaniards with female Amerindians and their descendents) – ethnic diversity has existed in varying degrees in each country according to the variety of **Native American Indian groups** present and the degree of their subjugation and assimilation to Spanish civil and religious domination. Add the presence of tens of thousands of **Negro slaves from different parts of Africa** – each group with its own unique history,

language, culture and religion – who arrived as part of the Atlantic Slave Trade during the Spanish colonial period, and we have the basic ingredients for producing a great deal of ethnic and religious diversity by the end of the Spanish colonial period in Central America in 1821.

**Table #1, “Ethnic Immigration to Central America, 1492-2005,”** reveals the diversity of ingredients that interacted to create distinct ethnic communities with their unique belief systems in each country of the Central American region. **Below is Part I of this table for the period 1492-1821** (see the complete table in Appendix I at the end of this paper).

<b>DATES</b>	<b>EVENTS</b>
1492 and following	The arrival of <b>Spanish colonists and Spanish Catholic missionaries</b> who represented both the official doctrinal position of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome as well as the “popular or folk Catholicism” of Medieval Europe, specifically of Spain (Dussel 1981:82-86). The beginning of the forced subjugation and conversion of the American Indians, and later of the African slaves, by Spanish civil and religious authorities. <b>Millions of Amerindians and African slaves died of mistreatment and disease during the first 100 years of Spanish colonialism.</b> The interbreeding of male Spanish colonists with female Amerindians during the next two centuries produced a majority population of <b>Mestizos, called “the cosmic race.”</b>
1500s-1800s	<b>Spanish (Roman) Catholic Church established in Central America among Spanish colonists, subjugated American Indians and African slaves</b> in each of the provinces under the Vice Royalty of New Spain in Mexico that received its authority from the Spanish Crown. The territory now known as the nation of Panama was under the Vice Royalty of New Granada in Bogotá, Colombia.
1440s-1850s	<b>African slaves</b> came to the Americas via the Atlantic slave trade by the Dutch, Portuguese, English, French and Spanish. However, few of these slaves were brought directly to Central America; those who were brought to Central America were largely assimilated into the larger <b>Mestizo</b> population over time.
1700-1800s	<b>English trading settlements</b> were established along the Caribbean shore of Central America, from Belize in the north to Panama in the south; the British colony of Belize (called British Honduras in the early days) was established in the late 1700s. <b>The Anglican Church</b> was established among <b>White European settlers</b> in the late 1700s and early 1800s; St. John’s Anglican Cathedral was built in Belize City in 1815 (this is the oldest Protestant church in Central America). The <b>London Baptist Missionary Society</b> (founded in London in 1795) began work in Belize in 1822. The <b>Presbyterian Church of Scotland</b> was established Belize City in 1825. <b>Black West Indian immigrants</b> from Jamaica and other British-controlled islands arrived to work in the logging industry and in agricultural and fishing activities; many of these new immigrants had become <b>Protestants (affiliated with Methodist, Baptist, Brethren, Moravian and other evangelical churches)</b> ; however, the Anglican Church refused to allow Blacks to become church members until the mid-1800s.
1797	<b>The British government deported thousands of rebellious Garífunas</b> (a mixed Indian and Black ethnic group that developed their own culture, language and religion; they are animists) from the island of St. Vincent in the Eastern Caribbean to the Bay Islands off the north coast of Honduras. By the early 1800s, the Garífunas had migrated to the coast of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, where they remain today.

1807-1820

Many European countries outlawed the **Atlantic Slave Trade**, which eventually created a labor shortage in the Caribbean basin.

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By identifying each major component of this ethnic mix we can see more clearly the complex ethno-linguistical and religious situation that existed in 1821 in this region (compare Dussel 1981:69-71). Regarding Belize, we will have to substitute “British” for “Spanish” in the mosaic presented below.

- Native American Indian groups (Amerindian) that were never conquered, subjugated and assimilated to the hybrid culture of the Spanish colonial period.
- Amerindian groups that were partially conquered, subjugated and assimilated to the hybrid culture of the Spanish colonial period.
- Amerindian groups that were essentially conquered, subjugated and assimilated to the hybrid culture of the Spanish colonial period.
- Groups of Spanish colonists from different parts of Spain – each group with its own unique history, language, culture and religious values – who immigrated to the Central American region and interbred with Amerindians to create the new “cosmic race” and their descendents.
- Groups of Spanish colonists from different parts of Spain – each group with its own unique history, language, culture and religious values – who immigrated to the Central American region and who partially interbred with Amerindians to create the new “cosmic race” and their descendents.
- Groups of Spanish colonists from different parts of Spain – each group with its own unique history, language, culture and religious values – who immigrated to the Central American region but who never interbred with Amerindians to create the new “cosmic race” and their descendents.
- Negro slaves from different parts of Africa – each group with its own unique history, language, culture and religious values – who were forcibly brought to the Central American region where they were partially subjugated and assimilated to the hybrid culture of the Spanish colonial period.
- Negro slaves from different parts of Africa – each group with its own unique history, language, culture and religious values – who were forcibly brought to the Central American region where they were fully subjugated and assimilated to the hybrid culture of the Spanish colonial period.
- Descendents of Spanish, British and African peoples who were born in the Americas but who maintained their racial and ethnic purity.
- Descendents of Spanish, British and African peoples who were born in the Americas but who interbred with other racial and ethnic groups, including Amerindians, and who produced the cultural mix of peoples who dwelt in the Central American region at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Racially and ethnically, the following groups – each group with its own unique history, language, culture and religious values – existed in the Central American region by 1821: **Amerindians** (pure blood), **Whites** (Caucasians mainly of Spanish and English ancestry), **Blacks** (Negroes of African ancestry), **Mestizos** (Spanish and Amerindian mixture in varying degrees), **Mulattos** (Negro and Caucasian mixture in varying degrees) and **Sambos** (Negro and Amerindian mixture in varying degrees).

Religiously, the following groups – each group with its own unique history, language, culture and religious beliefs, attitudes and practices – existed in the Central American region by 1821:

- **Animists** (unassimilated Amerindians and Negroes, such as the Black Caribs or Garífunas and the Miskito Indians prior to the arrival of Moravian missionaries in Nicaragua in 1849);
- **Roman Catholics** (among all racial and ethnic groups under Spanish rule);
- **Protestants** (mainly Anglicans who were present among all racial and ethnic groups under British rule);
- **Sephardim Jews** (assimilated to Spanish culture but who maintained elements of their Jewish heritage in secret); and
- **Unbelievers: Agnostics or Atheists** (who often hid their true beliefs, or lack thereof, from public scrutiny).

Also, among the Roman Catholic population there were **different degrees of religiosity** (compare Mansferrer 1998):

- **“Orthodox believers”** - those who believe and practice Roman Catholic doctrinal orthodoxy, whether clergy or laypersons;
- **“Reformers”** - those with a greater social consciousness among the clergy and laity, such as Bartolomé de las Casas and his associates and their followers, along with some of the Jesuit missionaries in Paraguay, for example, who treated the Indians humanely;
- **“Popular or Folk Catholicism”** - a syncretism of Spanish Catholic and animistic beliefs and practices (see Yamamori 1975, “Christopaganism”), such as mixing the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints with the worship of their “pagan gods and idols,” belief in miraculous cures, magic, witchcraft, shamanism and herbal healing or *curanderismo*, etc. Many immigrants from Spain and other parts of Europe practiced various degrees of “popular or folk Catholicism” in their homelands before coming to Central America, and after their arrival they and their descents were exposed to different degrees of Amerindian animism and/or African animism, which they adopted in various degrees, over the course of time (see Lehmann and Myers, 1997). According to Dussel, the majority of Spanish Catholics had a Christian conscience that was already “contaminated with paganism” before their arrival in the New World (Dussel 1981:69-70).

## The Development of Ethnic and Religious Diversity: 1821 – 1945

**Table #1, “Ethnic Immigration to Central America, 1492-2005,”** reveals the diversity of ingredients that interacted to create distinct ethnic communities with their unique belief systems in each country of the Central American region. **Below is Part II of this table for the period 1821-1945** (see the complete table in Appendix I at the end of this paper).

DATES	EVENTS
1821-1838	<b>Independence of Central American countries from Spain and Mexico.</b> Liberal governments passed the first laws to allow for religious tolerance during the 1840s, such as Costa Rica (1848). During this period the first significant <b>immigration of Black West Indians</b> (mainly from Jamaica and Barbados) occurred, starting in 1825, along the Caribbean coast of Central America.
1844-1917	<b>East Indian (Hindi) “contract laborers”</b> arrived in Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad-Tobago, Belize and elsewhere to work in agricultural and logging activities. Today, the largest populations of East Indians in Central America are found in Panama (108,000), Belize (8,700) and Honduras (a few thousand).
1848-1869	<b>The California Gold Rush</b> brought tens of thousands of travelers to Panama and Nicaragua for transit from the Atlantic to Pacific Oceans en route to California.
1849	German missionaries of the <b>Moravian Church</b> arrived in Bluefields, Nicaragua, to begin church work among the <b>native Miskito Indians and West Indian immigrants</b> on the Caribbean shore of Nicaragua and Honduras. Eventually, most Miskito Indians and many West Indians became members of the Moravian Church in Nicaragua and Honduras.
1850-1855	Construction of the <b>Panama Railroad</b> across the isthmus of Panama, from Colón on the Caribbean Sea to Panama City on the Pacific Ocean; most of the construction workers were imported <b>Chinese</b> contract laborers and <b>Black West Indian</b> immigrants from English and French-speaking Caribbean islands. <b>The</b>

**Anglican Church** was established in the port city of Colón (called Aspinwall) in 1850; Christ-by-the-Sea Anglican Church was constructed in Colón during the 1850s.

- 1850-1900 **European immigrants arrived in major cities of the region for commercial purposes**; beginning of European import and export activities from Central America to Europe and North America: coffee, lumber and mining production. **The Church of the Good Shepherd** (nondenominational at first and later affiliated with the **Protestant Episcopal Church**) was founded in San José, Costa Rica, in 1865 by European and North American immigrants.
- 1860s During the 1860s new laws were passed in Costa Rica to allow for the temporary immigration of **Blacks and Orientals** due to a labor shortage and the need for cheap unskilled labor. **Groups of Chinese “contract laborers”** (two-year contracts) arrived in Central America to work in agriculture and construction projects, such on coffee farms in the Central Valley and railroad building from coast-to-coast in Costa Rica, and as farm laborers in British Honduras (now called Belize), especially in the Toledo district. The early Chinese immigrants practiced **traditional Ancestor worship (and shamanism and Qigong = traditional medicine) or Buddhism**, but many were eventually converted to **Roman Catholicism**.
- 1860-1914 **Arab immigration from the Ottoman Empire** to Central America (first in Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua and later in Guatemala, Belize, Costa Rica and Panama) of **Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian origin**. The majority of these Arab immigrants were **Eastern Orthodox Christians**, although some studies reveal that between 15 and 20% were Muslims. **Today, most of the Arabs in the region are Roman Catholics, even though a minority still practice the Orthodox faith or are Muslims.**
- 1870-1940 **This was a period of accelerated immigration to Central America from many countries**; for example, in Costa Rica between 20% and 25% of the population growth could be attributed to immigration, particularly of **Spaniards, Chinese, West Indians, Nicaraguans, French, Germans, Italians and Jews**. **Thousands of Italian, Chinese and Black West Indian workers** arrived in Costa Rica during the 1870s and 1880s to work on the construction of the Atlantic Railroad, from San José in the central highlands to port Limón on the Caribbean coast. During the 1890s, the Costa Rican government decided to hire mainly European contract laborers (principally **Spaniards and Scandinavians**) to build the Pacific Railroad, from San José to Puntarenas on the Pacific Ocean. In 1897, the Costa Rican Congress passed a law that prohibited further immigration of **Negroes and citizens of China**, and during the 1930 restrictions were placed on the immigration of **European Jews** (mainly from Poland).
- 1880s-1920s **Beginning of the banana plantations and export industry controlled by North American companies** (such as United Fruit and Standard Brands) on the Caribbean coast of Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras; these companies also built local railroad lines to facilitate banana exportation. **Most of the laborers were English-speaking Blacks from the West Indies who were members of Protestant churches prior to their arrival in Central America.**
- 1882-1888 The French attempt to build a transisthmian Canal in Panama with **tens of thousand of immigrant laborers from many countries**, 25,000 of whom died of disease during this period. Most of the construction workers were **West Indian and Chinese laborers**. The **Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society**

**of Jamaica** began work in Panama among West Indian canal workers; later, missionary work was begun in Costa Rica in 1894.

- 1880s **The Jamaican Baptist Missionary Society** (founded in 1842) began missionary work in Central America among the **Black West Indians** (now called "Creoles") in Belize and Costa Rica (1887).
- 1880-1940 Although **Sephardim Jews** (from the Iberian Peninsula) were present in Central America during the Spanish Colonial period (16th - 18th centuries) and other **Jewish merchants** arrived during the 19th century, there was little Jewish presence in the region until the 1880s when Jews from Eastern Europe (called **Ashkenazi Jews from Poland, Russia and Rumania**) began to arrive because of hardships in their homelands. The largest number of Polish-Jewish immigrants (called "polacos") to Costa Rica arrived between 1930-1936. Small Jewish colonies were established throughout Central America by 1940, especially in Panama and Costa Rica. **Today, Jews in Central America represent the Orthodox and Reform traditions.** However, hundreds of Jews left the region for safe haven in other countries during the armed conflicts that plagued Central America (except Costa Rica) during the period 1960-1996.
- 1882-1925 **First Protestant missionaries begin to arrive from North America to work among the Spanish-speaking population:** the **Presbyterian Church USA** began work in Guatemala in 1882; the fundamentalist **Central America Mission** in Costa Rica in 1891 (and during the next decade in all of Central America); the **Seventh-day Adventist Church** in Honduras (1891); the **Pentecostal Mission** (a Holiness body from Nashville, TN) in Guatemala (1901); the **California Friends (Quakers)** in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (1902); the **Church of the Nazarene** in Guatemala (1915); the **Pilgrim Holiness Church** in Guatemala (1917); the **Methodist Church** in Costa Rica (1917); the **Latin America Mission** in Costa Rica (1921), etc. Most of the other Protestant missionary societies that arrived in Central America did so after the end of World War II in 1945.
- 1904-1914 **The building of the Panama Canal and the establishment of the Panama Canal Zone** by the U.S. government in the newly independent state of Panama (which previously was a province of Colombia) brought **thousands of immigrant workers** to Panama after 1904. By 1913 approximately 65,000 men were on the payroll of the Panama Canal Company. **Most were West Indians**, although some 12,000 workers were recruited from southern Europe (**mainly Italians and Greeks**). Five thousand U.S. citizens filled the administrative, professional and supervisory jobs. To provide these men with the comforts and amenities to which they were accustomed, a paternalistic community was organized in the Canal Zone with churches for everyone in a segregated environment: the **Salvation Army** in 1904; the **Southern Baptist Convention** in 1905; the **Methodist Church** in 1906; the **Church of God of Anderson, Indiana**, in 1906; and the **Free Methodist Church** in 1913 mainly served the White population in the Canal Zone. The Wesleyan Methodist Church conducted work among the West Indian laborers with pastors from Jamaica.
- Early 1900s Local railroad lines were built on the Caribbean coast to accommodate the expanding banana export industry in Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras. **By 1920, small numbers of those of foreign origin -- Chinese, European Jews, Arabs (Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians), Greeks, South Asians (mainly East Indian Hindus), Western Europeans (mainly British, German and Italian) and North Americans -- were present in the region.**

1904-1945	Beginning of the “ <b>Free Apostolic</b> ” <b>Pentecostal movement</b> in El Salvador under independent Canadian missionary Frederick Mebius; the “ <b>Jesus Only</b> ” <b>Pentecostal movement</b> in León, Nicaragua (1914); the <b>Pentecostal Holiness Church</b> in Costa Rica (1918); the <b>Foursquare Church</b> in Panama (1928); the <b>Assemblies of God</b> in El Salvador (1930); and the <b>Church of God of Cleveland-TN</b> in Guatemala (1932). Most of the other Pentecostal groups that exist today in the region did not arrive in Central America until the 1950s or later. All of these missionary organizations sought to win converts among the Spanish-speaking and/or Indigenous populations in Central America.
1936-1939	<b>During and after the Spanish Civil War, many Spaniards immigrated to Central America.</b> Costa Rica, for example, has a large community of <b>Catalonians</b> from the province of Barcelona who are fervent Roman Catholics and devotees of the Black Virgin of Montserrat. Also, many <b>Basque and Italian immigrants</b> arrived in the region, especially in Costa Rica.
1941-1945	<b>The outbreak of World War II</b> in Europe and the Pacific curtailed immigration to Central America until after the end of WWII, in 1945.

## The Development of Ethnic and Religious Diversity: 1945 – 2005

**Table #1, “Ethnic Immigration to Central America, 1492-2005,”** reveals the diversity of ingredients that interacted to create distinct ethnic communities with their unique belief systems in each country of the Central American region. **Below is Part III of this table for the period 1945-2005** (see the complete table in Appendix I at the end of this paper).

<b>DATES</b>	<b>EVENTS</b>
After 1945	<b>Thousands of White English-speaking immigrants</b> from the USA, Canada and Britain have created enclaves of foreign-born residents in many areas of Central America, especially in the larger cities and in the beach communities. Among them are many retired people from North America and Europe. Many of these recent immigrants arrived with their own brand of religion, which they practiced in their country of origin; many so-called “new religious movements” were introduced to Costa Rica during this period, especially the non-Christian variety.
1960s-1990s	<b>Costa Rica</b> in particular received <b>thousands of Spanish-speaking political refugees from South American countries</b> during a conflictive era of repressive right-wing military dictatorships (mainly from <b>Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Peru</b> ), as well as waves of political and economic refugees from <b>Nicaragua</b> during the right-wing Somoza dynasty and, later, during the left-wing Sandinista government. Today, Costa Rica has approximately 300,000 permanent residents from Nicaragua and a seasonal influx of another 100,000-150,000 agricultural workers from <b>Nicaragua and Panama</b> . The majority of the political refugees from other Central American countries sought asylum in Mexico or the USA, although a small number of these refugees came to Costa Rica as well.
1980s to present	The arrival of a growing number of <b>Chinese immigrants</b> to Central America from Taiwan and from Mainland China began a new era for the existing Chinese communities in Panama, Costa Rica and other countries. The first wave represented immigration from Taiwan, but during the 1990s Chinese immigrants began arriving from Hong Kong. Today, there are four main language groups of Chinese in the region: <b>Yue-Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin and Taiwanese-Min</b>

**Nan.** Sources indicate that there are about 100,000 Chinese (mainly Cantonese, Hakka and Mandarin-speaking) in **Panama** today, about 50,000 Chinese (mainly Mandarin-speaking) in **Costa Rica**, about 20,000 Chinese (mainly Cantonese-speaking) in **Guatemala**, and about 8,200 Chinese (mainly Mandarin-speaking) in **Belize**. **Panama** has two Chinese daily newspapers and Latin America's only Chinese radio station that broadcasts in several Chinese dialects. Panama's large Chinese community has its own school, Sun Yat-sen School, built with a contribution of 2 million dollars from the Taiwanese government; the school teaches students in Mandarin and 40% of the student body is non-Chinese. During the 1980s, officials of the Panamanian and Honduran governments sold travel documents to tens of thousands of Chinese from Mainland China and Hong Kong. Immigration from China, much of it illegal, continues today. There are a dozen or so **Chinese Baptist churches**, as well as those of other denominations, in Panama and Costa Rica, that use one or more of the main Chinese dialects. However, the majority of these immigrants are practitioners of **traditional Chinese Ancestor worship or Buddhism**. **Some are followers of Daoism (also called Taoism)**.

1980s to present

Many **Korean businessmen and administrative personnel** of Korean-owned companies and their families began arriving in Central America (mainly in Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras) for commercial purposes: to take advantage of growing investment opportunities in the region, to establish distribution plants for Korean products and/or to build and operate manufacturing plants mainly for the export clothing industry. There are three **Korean-speaking evangelical churches in Costa Rica**, and one Korean-led missionary organization is engaged in church planting among several Indigenous groups as well as the Spanish-speaking population. However, some of the new Korean arrivals are **Buddhists**.

1990s to present

Costa Rica in particular experienced an influx of **Russian immigrants** during the 1990s, now numbering over 5,000, many of whom are adherents of the **Russian Orthodox faith**. In addition, about 10,000 **Colombians** have immigrated to Costa Rica in search of a safe haven from the violence in their homeland.

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## Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Central America Today

### *The Situation of Ethnic Diversity in the Region*

Faced with constant challenges to their survival and the preservation of their cultural distinctives, many minority groups in the Central American region are struggling with their own ethnic identity in the modern world. This dilemma is revealed in the following quote from the "Introduction" of ***Demographic Diversity and Change in the Central American Isthmus***, edited by Anne R. Pebley and Luis Rosero-Bixby (Pebley 1997).

Central Americans' experience with ethnic and cultural identity ... provides considerable food for thought for scholars and others concerned with the meaning of ethnicity and the process of cultural change. Despite the ravages of the conquest and post-conquest eras, **the indigenous population of Central America**, and particularly in Guatemala and on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, has survived the past 400 years. In fact, high indigenous fertility rates in Guatemala combined with gradual improvements in health status and a reduction in political violence means the substantial majority of Guatemalans in the 21st century are likely to be indigenous (instead of the current 50% of the population). **Yet with reduced repression and majority rather than minority status, the indigenous population may face a new set of problems related to maintaining its own distinct ethnicity...** There are also several other major ethnic groups in Central America including mestizos, creoles, garifuna, and those of European origin. Because of the unique history

of each group, **the choice between integration and retention of cultural distinctiveness is an important issue for each group.**

An important part of those cultural distinctives involves religious beliefs, values and behavior and their role in maintaining the cohesion of the ethnic group, especially as the group interacts with the majority society (usually Mestizo) and with other minority groups in the Central American region.

Today, there is greater ethnic and religious diversity in the Central American region than ever before because of the accumulative effect of the immigration of a variety of ethnic and religious groups since 1960, and due to the evangelistic and church-planting efforts of Protestant mission agencies and local denominations as well as to the propagation of marginal Christian and non-Christian groups.

The following table gives us an overview of the current distribution of race-ethnic groups in the region:

**Table 2**  
**ESTIMATED POPULATION OF CENTRAL AMERICA**  
**BY RACE-ETHNIC GROUPS, 2000**

COUNTRY	TOTAL POP. (millions)	MESTIZO %	WHITE %	BLACK-CREOLE %	AMERICAN INDIAN %	JEW %	ARAB %	ASIAN %	OTHER %	TOTAL %
Guatemala	14.7	45.0	10.0	1.0	43.0	(1,170)	(1,100)	(21,000)	1.0	100%
Belize	.279	36.4	10.0	34.1*	10.0	(100)	(2,500)	(17,000)	9.5	100%
Honduras	7.0	80.0	10.0	2.0	7.0	(500)	(100,000)	(7,000)	1.0	100%
El Salvador	6.7	90.0	9.0		1.0	(100)	(50,000)	(2,000)		100%
Nicaragua	5.5	69.0	17.0	9.0	3.0	(100)	(2,500)	(12,000)		100%
Costa Rica	4.0	95.0**		3.0	1.0	(2,400)	(100)	1.0		100%
Panama	3.0	70.0	10.0	13.0	5.0	(10,000)	(17,200)	2.0		100%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>28.179</b>	<b>65.8%</b>	<b>13.0%</b>	<b>8.9%</b>	<b>10.0%</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>0.5%***</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Compiled by Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES  
(Last revised on August 2, 2005)

We have added the following notes to help clarify the information presented above.

**NOTES:**

1. Asian: mainly includes Chinese, Koreans, Japanese and Asian-Indians (Indo-Pakistanis).
2. \*Black-Creole: most "Blacks" in Central America are "Creoles" of West Indian descent who live along the Caribbean coast from Belize in the north to Panama in the south; the exceptions are the Garífunas (182,000) of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua who are mixed race: African slaves and American Indians from the Island of St. Vincent in the Caribbean; and the Miskito Indians who are of mixed race: African slaves and American Indians from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and Honduras who speak the Miskito language (about 183,400).
3. Belize = 34.1% Black-Creole: 27.7% Creole (West Indians) and 6.4% Garífuna (Black and American Indian). "Other" (9.5%) includes 21,000 Chinese (mainly Mandarin-speaking), 8,500 Asian Indians, 5,760 German Mennonites, and small numbers of Japanese, Koreans, Arabs and Jews.
4. Guatemala: includes about 25,000 Garífunas and 125,000 Creoles in the Livingston and Puerto Barrios areas of the Caribbean coast (150,000 = about 1% of the total population).
5. Honduras: Black-Creole includes 50,000 West Indians; the American Indian category includes 98,000 Garífunas and 29,000 Miskitos (127,000 = 5.5% of the total population).
6. Nicaragua: Black-Creole includes an estimated 495,000 (9%) West Indians; American Indian (5% = 275,000) includes an estimated 250,000 Miskitos; White includes Caucasians of mainly Spanish, German and North American descent.
7. \*\*Costa Rica = 95.0% Mestizo-White: the national census combines the two, but it is estimated that about 70% are Mestizo and 25% White (Caucasians mainly of Spanish, Italian, French, German and North American descent). Costa Rica has a population of about 40,000 Asians, mainly Chinese and Koreans.
8. Panama: some sources have reported a community of 112,800 Chinese, mainly from Taiwan, and a significant population of Asian-Indians (108,000), plus a small population of Japanese (1,400) and Koreans (500). However, if these estimates were

used then the total Asian population of Panama would be about 222,700 or 7.4% of the total population, which is a much higher figure than the 2% given by the national census.

9. Also in Panama there are significant populations of Arabs (17,200) and Jews (10,000).
10. The total Arab population in Central America is estimated at 173,400: includes mainly Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians.
11. The total Chinese population in Central America is estimated at 153,540, largely concentrated in Panama, Costa Rica and Guatemala.
12. The total Asian-Indian (Indo-Pakistani) population in Central America is estimated at 116,700 (mainly in Panama and Honduras).
13. \*\*\*The total Asian population for Central America is estimated at 275,240, which is about 10% of the total population; it appears that the official census data for each country seriously under estimates the size of the Asian-origin population; the missing Asian count is probably part of the Mestizo category, in my opinion.
14. The total Jewish population in Central America is estimated at 14,370, largely concentrated in Panama and Costa Rica.

### ***The Situation of Religious Diversity in the Region***

The well-documented shift in religious affiliation in the Central American region since 1960, **away from the Roman Catholic Church and toward Evangelical groups**, has led Dr. Charles Denton (president of the CID-Gallup Latin America research group in Costa Rica) to project that by the year 2025 more than 50% of all Central Americans will be Protestants if the current trend continues (Denton 2005).

In addition to **Protestant** growth in the region, there has also been a significant increase in those who identify with **Marginal Christian** groups (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Light of the World Church, etc.), **non-Christian groups** (more than 100 are known to exist in the region) and with the category "No Religion" (more than 10% of the population in some countries).

Based on the author's own research regarding the Protestant movement in Central America since 1972, we have produced a variety of documents and graphics to demonstrate its extraordinary growth since 1935 in general and since 1960 in particular. Below are three of these charts. The first one is the **estimated** Protestant population in Central America from 1935 to 2000.

**Table 3**

### **TABLE OF ESTIMATED PROTESTANT POPULATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA: 1935-2000**

(Based on research by PROLADES from a variety of sources)

	1935	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	1995	2000
PAN	2	5	7.6	8	9	8	7.3	10
CRI	1	2.5	4.3	5	7	10	14	18
NIC	1	3	4.5	5	6	9	12	15
SAL	1	2	2.2	3	8	14	17	20
HON	1	1	1.5	2	9	15	21	25
GUA	1	2	3	4	10	18	25	24
CAM	1.2	2.9	3.9	4.5	8.2	12.7	16	18.7

SOURCE: Clifton L. Holland / PROLADES, June 1998

Of the six Spanish-speaking countries of the region, five had a Protestant population of 15% or over by 2000; **the exception was Panama**, which suffered from a massive exodus during the 1990s of English-speaking North Americans and West Indians from the U.S. controlled Canal Zone, in anticipation of the U.S. government turning over the Canal Zone and the Panama Canal to the Panamanian government on December 31, 1999. This exodus left most of the English-speaking Canal Zone churches with few members, and the resulting decline in membership has affected the total size of the Protestant population in Panama. Had this exodus not occurred, then the Protestant population would undoubtedly have been over 15% by 2000 in Panama, which would be comparable with Protestant population figures in other countries of the region in 2000.

**In addition, three of these countries all had a Protestant population of over 20% in 2000: Guatemala, 24%; Honduras, 25%; and El Salvador, 20%.** More recent public opinion polls on these countries indicate that the Protestant population has continued to grow: it had reached 30% in Guatemala by March 2004, according to a CID-Gallup poll; and in El Salvador, by November 2004, it had reached 22.3%, according to a poll by IUDOP (a research unit of the Central American University in San Salvador). However, in Honduras the Protestant population was reported to be 23% in January 2002, according to a nationwide poll by the Le Vote Company, which is less than the figure of 25% reported in 2000. It should be noted that both of these figures are within the plus/minus 3% error factor of both polls, which basically means that the Protestant population in Honduras is holding steady at 23-25%.

**The situation in Guatemala regarding Protestant population growth is somewhat more complex, as seen in the following table that covers the decade of the 1990s.** The average size of the Protestant population in Guatemala during this period was 22.22%. It is reported by many observers that this plateau in Protestant population growth was partially due to adverse public opinion regarding human rights and corruption scandals involving at least two prominent Evangelical political leaders: Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt (who led a repressive military dictatorship during 1982-83, and who later served in Congress), and Jorge Elías Serrano (who was president during 1991-93). See Roger Grossman's doctoral dissertation (Grossman 2002, available on the Internet) for a discussion of these scandals and other factors that slowed down Evangelical church growth during the 1990s in Guatemala.

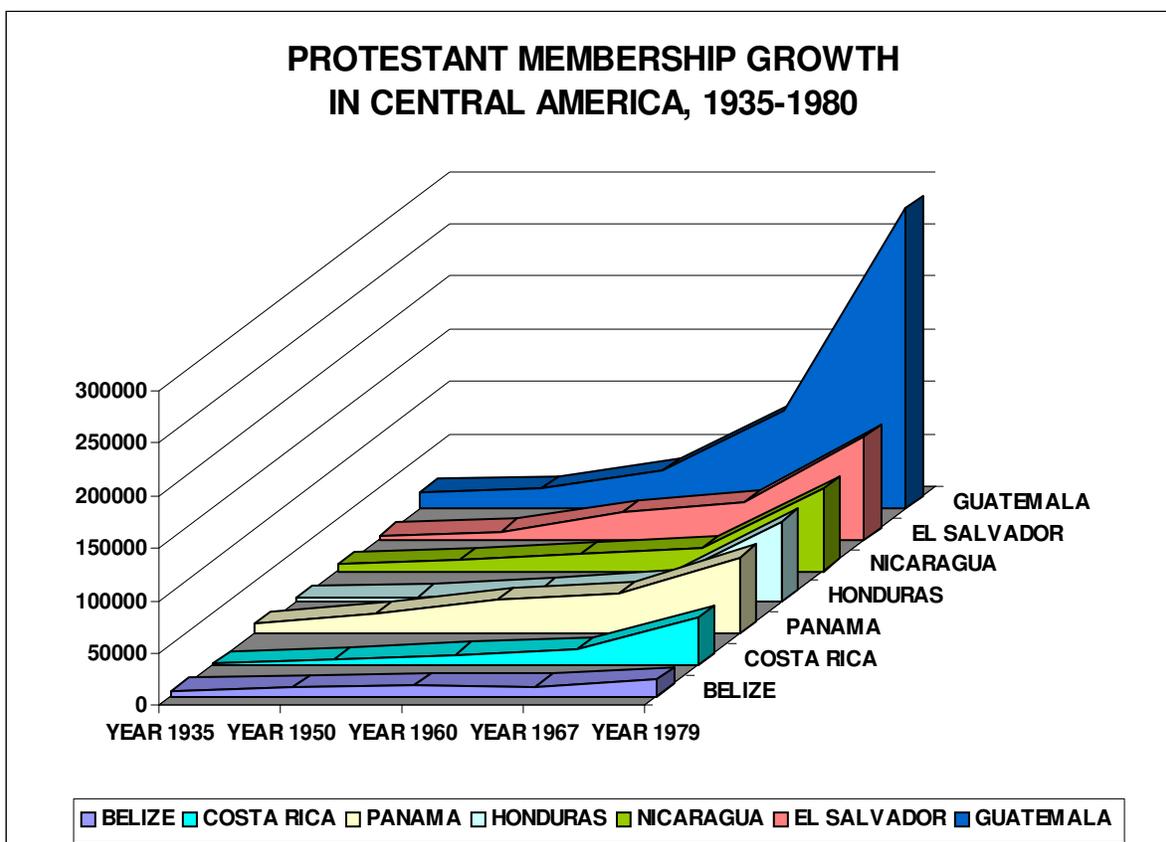
**Table 4**

**PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ON RELIGION IN GUATEMALA, 1990-2001**

DATE	CATH	PROT	OTHER	NONE	NOTES	SOURCE
Mar-90	65.5	20.5		17	17% = OTHERS / NONE	CBN POLL, MARCH 1990
Jun-90	60.4	26.4	2.1	11.1		CID-GALLUP POLL, JUNE 1990
Jul-90	65.6	18		16.4	16.4% = OTHERS / NONE	CBN POLL, JULY 1990
Jul-91	66	19	2	13		CID-GALLUP POLL, JULY 1991
May-95	65	22	1	12		CID-GALLUP POLL, MAY 1995
Oct-95	65	23	1	11		CID-GALLUP POLL, OCT 1995
Apr-96	62	25	1	11		CID-GALLUP POLL, APRIL 1996
Sep-96	67	22	1	10		CID-GALLUP POLL, SEPT 1996
Feb-97	70	21	2	7		CID-GALLUP POLL, FEB 1997
2001	57.6	25.3	3	14.2		SEPAL-PROYECTO JOSUE, 2001

The next chart provides us with a visual overview of the proportional size of the Protestant membership in each country of the region between 1935 and 1980 by key dates: 1935, 1950, 1960, 1967 and 1980 (Holland 1983). It is obvious that there were only minor differences in the size of the Protestant population in all these countries in 1935, but Protestant church growth was greater in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador than in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama between 1935 and 1980 for a variety of reasons that we will not be able to explore in this paper. However, my website contains a section entitled, "A Study of Religious Change in Latin America" (Holland 2003a), where we discuss factors of attraction and rejection that affect the growth of religious groups, especially relating to Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches (see <http://www.prolades.com/prolades1/documents/desertion/religion-change.htm>). The index of the contents to this webpage is found in Apendice III at the end of this paper.

Table 5



### ***The Role of PROLADES in Clarifying the Situation of Religious Diversity in the Region***

Since 1977, PROLADES (originally known as PROCADDES because of its early focus on *Central America*) has played an important role in documenting changes to religious affiliation in the region. As the founder and first director of PROLADES, my own interests and activities have determined the focus and scope of our research in each country. **Initially, the greatest challenge was defining and measuring the**

**growth of the Protestant movement as the most important phenomenon that is taking place in the region. We were concerned about which Protestant denominations were growing and why.**

After consulting with Church historian Dr. Wilton Nelson, professor of Church History at the Latin American Biblical Seminary (San José, Costa Rica), during the early 1970s regarding his definition of the “Protestant movement” and reviewing the available literature on the subject, I was able to create a working definition for the purpose of studying and measuring the growth of Protestant denominations in the region, beginning with Costa Rica.

Fortunately for me, Dr. Nelson had produced an important study on the subject, entitled “A History of Protestantism in Costa Rica,” as his doctoral dissertation at Princeton Seminary (Princeton, NJ) in 1957, which was later published under the same title in English (Nelson 1963). I was able to start with this information and design my own fieldwork for continuing to study this phenomena, which led me to conduct a national study on the Protestant movement in 1974 in Costa Rica under the auspices of the International Institute for In-depth Evangelization (INDEF) headquarters in San José. **In 1977 I was able to repeat this national study and to develop a database of comparative statistics from previous fieldwork and published studies from which to analyze the regional growth patterns among the various Protestant denominations in Costa Rica.**

After sharing the published results of my research with evangelical leaders (in Latin America, Protestants normally are called “evangelicals”) in Costa Rica and Nicaragua where I was an advisor for INDEF, the word spread to other countries, and **I began to receive invitations to serve as technical advisor for similar national “church growth studies” in each country of the region.** Between 1977 and 1982, a national directory of the Protestant movement was produced in all seven countries under the auspices of PROCADES (see the Bibliography for more information about each of these directories). To accompany each national directory, we produced a series of research-in-progress reports for each country in collaboration with local evangelical service organizations, such as CEPAD in Nicaragua and the Bible Society of El Salvador. **What this series of studies accomplished was to provide the general public with a very reliable source of information about what the Protestant movement was and how it developed historically in the context of Central America** (see Dow 2003 for a discussion of the problem of “Measuring the Growth of Protestantism”).

As an aside, I should mention the fact that I studied under Dr. Donald McGavran, known internationally as “The Father of the Church Growth Movement,” while studying at Fuller Theological Seminary in the School of World Mission (now called the School of Intercultural Studies) from 1968-1971, where I graduated with an M.A. in Missiology/Cultural Anthropology in 1974. (Note: I had moved to Costa Rica in April 1972 to work with the Latin America Mission, where I finished writing my M.A. thesis in early 1973: **“The Religious Dimension in Hispanic Los Angeles: A Protestant Case Study,”** which was published under the same title in 1974 by the William Carey Press.)

Part of this paper is a reflection of my own sojourn as a Protestant missionary (I am an active Presbyterian layman not a pastor) from 1972 to 1989, as a “church growth researcher” trained by Dr. McGavran and his associates at Fuller/SWM, and as a cultural anthropologist seeking to understand the phenomena of religious conversion and social change within the various ethnic groups in the context of each country and of Central America as a region.

By the time I returned to Pasadena in early 1980 to begin my formal doctoral studies in the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, I had already produced a draft copy of a series of “Status of Christian Country Profiles” on Central America, which were later completed and published under the title, **World Christianity: Central America and the Caribbean** (Holland 1981). The staff of the Missions Advanced Research and Communications (MARC) department of World Vision helped to create the profiles on the Caribbean region. This volume was the “Reader’s Digest condensed version” of my doctoral dissertation on “The History of the Protestant Movement in Central America” (Doctor of Missiology / Historical Development of Christianity, Fuller/SWM, 1983).

During 1980-1981, while studying in the SWM (Doctoral program) and teaching in the Hispanic Studies Department/School of Theology (Master's program) at FTS, **I began developing my own classification system of the Protestant movement in Latin America**, which I incorporated into my dissertation in an attempt to "order the universe" of what is perceived to be the Protestant movement (see Appendix II, Part B). I decided to build on the foundation provided by Dr. J. Gordon Melton in the first edition of his ***Encyclopedia of American Religions*** (Melton 1978) by adopting his model of describing "religious family groupings" (see <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/profiles/listmelton.htm>), and by **creating a alphanumeric classification code (clascode)** for each tradition, family and subfamily of every religion known to exist in the Americas. We maintained the basic parameters used by Melton, which are that "families of religious groups" share three common features: **heritage** (historical origins and development), **belief system** (worldview) and **lifestyle** (interaction with the larger society). This implies that primary religious groups within a "family" have more in common among themselves than with religious groups that are not part of the same family (Melton 1978: see "Introduction").

**However, within each "family of primary religious groups," a few notable differences may exist that divide the members of the same family into subgroups, each with its corresponding religious subculture.** This is the case, for example, with the "Baptist Family" that can be subdivided into Calvinists, Arminians and Restorationists. Although Melton places the "Adventists" within the Baptist Family, we have made the Adventist Movement a separate category due to its problematic historical relationship with other Protestant groups.

Although we have depended upon Melton quite heavily for the principal features of our current typology, our fieldwork experience in Latin America and the Caribbean since 1972 has led us to make modifications in Melton's model to contextualize it for these cultural areas. Some of Melton's categories proved to be inadequate to accurately describe the complex phenomena that we observed south of the U.S. border. This was true especially regarding religious groups within the "Pentecostal Tradition." We found it necessary to define new "subfamilies" of denominations or independent churches, thus adding new categories to Melton's basic typology. In other cases, we decided to change the names of some of the "families" used by Melton for the sake of clarity: for example, the "European Free Church Family" was changed to the "Anabaptist/Mennonite Family."

It should be noted that the revised PROLADES typology includes Christian Churches of different traditions as well as other churches and/or primary religious groups that are non-Christian. Our typology is intended to be all-inclusive (global / universal) in scope, so that all religious groups may be included and described, whether or not they are considered "Christian."

Numerous revisions have been made to our typology since the first version appeared in 1984. The latest edition is now available in English and Spanish versions as ***Toward a Classification System of Religious Groups in the Americas by Major Traditions and Family Types*** (Holland 2004a). Copies of both language versions are available on my website in PDF format: [www.prolades.com](http://www.prolades.com).

This website hosts the documents and databases of the **Religion-in-the-Americas (RITA) program**, sponsored by PROLADES, which contains information about every known religious group (Christian and non-Christian) in 52 countries, covering all of the Americas plus Spain and Portugal. This website has a search-engine (<http://www.prolades.com/searchengine/>) so that users can search by tradition, clascode, country, city and key word in the RITA database. Since 1990 most of my efforts have been directed to **the study of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in the Americas and the Iberian Peninsula** using all available sources, including the multitude of new resources available via the Internet since 1996 (see Saliba 1995; and Holland 2001, editor). Some of these NRMs are actually old religions that were founded centuries ago, but they are "new" to the countries of Central America.

**Appendix II, "Contents of the PROLADES Classification System of Religious Groups,"** provides us with a practical means of viewing and gaining a greater understanding of the complexity of religious groups that exist today in the Central American region, and in other regions of the Americas and the Iberian Peninsula. Below are the **main categories** under which the major traditions and families of religious groups are organized:

- A. Older Liturgical Christian Churches
  - A1. Eastern Orthodox (Christian) Tradition
  - A2. Western Roman Catholic Tradition
- B. The Protestant Movement
- C. Marginal Christian Groups
- D. Non-Christian Religions by Major Traditions
- E. Multi-Religious Organizations and Groups
- F. Non-Religious Organizations, Groups and Population Segments
- G. Unclassified Groups

After the reader familiarizes himself or herself with the basic outline of this classification system it will be easier to understand the information presented later regarding religious diversity in Central America, especially since 1945 when the situation became much more complicated. For example, **Table 5** below gives an overview of how many “religious groups” (organizational bodies: denominations or associations of churches) are known to exist in each country of the region.

**Table 5**

**Number of Religious Groups by Country, Status of Research in Mid-January 2004  
With Population Estimates For Mid-2000:  
Special Sort of Data on the Central American Region**

COUNTRY	COUNTRY CODE	NUMBER OF PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS	NUMBER OF OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS	TOTAL NUMBER OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS	CURRENT STATUS OF THE STUDY	ESTIMATED POPULATION MID-2000 (MILLIONS)
USA	USA	864	1492	2356	DB, HCN	281.422
MEXICO	MEX	1556	130	1686	DB, HCP	99.639
BRAZIL	BRA	155	108	263	DB	170.115
<b>CENTRAL AMERICAN REGION</b>						
COSTA RICA	CRI	185	77	262	DB, HCN	3.589
GUATEMALA	GTE	227	31	258	DB, HCN	12.670
NICARAGUA	NIC	119	30	149	DB, HCN	5.074
HONDURAS	HON	112	17	129	DB, HCN	6.130
EL SALVADOR	ELS	77	19	96	DB, HCN	6.280
PANAMA	PAN	53	32	85	DB, HCN	2.857
BELIZE	BEL	63	15	78	DB, HCN	.254
<b>SUBTOTALS</b>	7	836	221	1,057		36.600
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>52*</b>	<b>5,260</b>	<b>2,967</b>	<b>8,227</b>		<b>811.255</b>

(DB = COMPUTER DATABASE; HCN = HARD COPY, NATIONAL STUDY; HCP = HARD COPY, PARTIAL STUDY - CITY OR REGION)

Created by Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES  
Last revised on January 23, 2004

**By “religious group” we are not referring to individual congregations (churches, missions or worship centers) but rather of legal entities (organizational bodies) that have administrative authority over a group of local congregations in a country, or we are referring to a local branch office or represen-**

tative unit of a denomination or religious organization that is well established internationally. For example, if only one “Vineyard Fellowship” exists in Costa Rica, but this is a “representative unit” affiliated with the Association of Vineyard Churches in Anaheim, California, founded by John Wimber in 1986, then the “branch office” in Costa Rica of this international association of Charismatic churches is considered to be an established “religious group” in Costa Rica and is listed as such in the RITA database and will appear in Table 5.

**This table reveals that Costa Rica and Guatemala have a more diverse mixture of religious groups than the other countries in the region, with a total of 262 and 258, respectively.** Although both countries have almost double the number of Protestant denominations and associations of churches than the other countries, Costa Rica stands out in Central America because it has a large number of “other religious groups,” which gives this small nation of only 3.6 million people in 2000 the distinction of having the largest number of “religious groups” in the region, with 262. Guatemala is a close second with a total of 258 religious groups, but it should be noted that Guatemala had a total population of 12.7 million in 2000, which is over three times the size of the Costa Rican population.

If these statistics accurately reflect the reality in each country, then it should be obvious that something unusual is happening in Costa Rica in terms of producing the diversity of religious groups that exist in this small country. **Why is Costa Rica a more fertile ground for the establishment of non-Christian religious groups than other countries in the region?** To view the current list of religious groups in Costa Rica, see the “**Directory of Religious Groups in Costa Rica, 2004**” (Holland 2004b) on my website. Also, an earlier list of Protestant denominations in Costa Rica is included in the report, “**Estudio Sociorreligiosos de Costa Rica, 2001**,” which contains a series of tables and graphics to help visualize the historical development of the Protestant movement in that country up to that date (Holland 2001).

Since the late 1980s numerous research organizations have conducted reliable public opinion polls on all the countries of Central America, which enables us to understand more clearly the changing situation regarding “religious affiliation” in each country based on the following categories: Catholic, Protestant, Other Religions and No Religion/No Response). See Table 6 below.

**Table 6**  
**Religious Affiliation in the Americas:**  
**A Special Sort of Data on the Central American Region, 1997-2001**

REGION / COUNTRY (alphabetical order by country)	DATE STATS	% CATH	% PROT	% OTHER	% NONE	% TOTAL	SOURCE	MEMO
BELIZE	2000	49.6	27.0	14.0	9.4	100%	CENSUS	2000 NATIONAL CENSUS OF POPULATION
COSTA RICA	2001	70.1	18.0	1.8	10.1	100%	POLL	DEMOSCOPIA POLL, NOV 2001
EL SALVADOR	2000	50.5	25.2	1.8	22.5	100%	POLL	CID-GALLUP POLL, SEPT 2000
GUATEMALA	2001	55.1	29.8	2.3	12.7	100%	POLL	CID-GALLUP POLL, NOV 2001
HONDURAS	1999	66.7	22.5	1.1	9.7	100%	POLL	CID-GALLUP POLL, MAY 1999
NICARAGUA	1997	78.0	12.0	2.0	8.0	100%	POLL	CID-GALLUP POLL, APRIL 1997
PANAMA	2000	81.8	10.2	4.1	4.0	100%	POLL	CID-GALLUP POLL, SEPT 2000
<b>AVERAGES</b>		<b>64.5</b>	<b>20.8</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>10.9</b>	<b>100%</b>		<b>ALL OF THE ABOVE</b>

Based on the data presented in this table and previously, **we can conclude that the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church that existed prior to 1960 in Central America no longer exists.** Numerous studies have demonstrated that a growing number of those who are born into Catholic families are no longer satisfied with their religious heritage and are choosing to join other religious groups, mainly evangelical churches, marginal Christian groups or non-Christian religions, or have chosen not to affiliate with any religious group (see Bastian, Berryman, Cleary, Dow, Holland, Martin, Schafer, Steigenga and Stoll).

**The fact that nearly 4% of the total population of the region is now affiliated with “other religions” is significant.**

- This category includes “**marginal Christian groups**” such as Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Light of the World Church (from Mexico), Mita Congregation (Puerto Rico), Voice of the Chief Cornerstone (Puerto Rico), the Unification Church (Korea), Unity School of Christianity (USA), the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Brazil) and others. These groups are actively seeking to convert people (mainly inactive Catholics) to their particular movement, and they have grown significantly in Central America since 1960.
- Others in this category include “**non-Christian religions**,” some of which arrived in the region as a result of the immigration of their members from other countries (such as **Arabs, Jews, Chinese and Asian-Indians**) and who have maintained their religious traditions; however, these religious groups have not been proselytic in the context of Central America. In addition, a portion of the **Amerindians** in Central America still maintain the animistic beliefs and practices of their ancestors (now called “Native American Spirituality”) and have resisted conversion to other religions (see Greider 1998 and Jeffrey, no date, regarding “Mayan Spirituality”).
- **By contrast, dozens of NRMs have arrived in Central America since 1960 that represent new options in the religious marketplace:** many are **Buddhist or Hindu-related**; others represent the **Ancient Wisdom Tradition** (The Grand Universal Fraternity, the Ancient & Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis, the Universal Gnostic Movement, the Alquimist Center, Corpus Hermeticum, Satanism and Wicca); and still others are associated with the **Psychic-Spiritualist-New Age Tradition**: New Acropolis Cultural Centers, Institute for Bioenergetic Analysis, Center of Attitudinal Healing, Silva Mind Control, Church of Scientology (Dianetics), Anthroposophical Society, Theosophical Society (one of the older groups) and Siloism.

**The RITA-PROLADES website contains 37 profiles (in Spanish) of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Costa Rica,** which includes four profiles of Catholic-related independent groups, two profiles of Protestant-related groups (Quakers and Messianic Jews), 12 profiles of “marginal Christian groups,” and 19 profiles of non-Christian religious groups. These profiles were written by students of the University of Costa Rica who were finishing their Licenciade degree programs in Sociology, Psychology or Communications during the period 2001-2003, and who worked for PROLADES under my supervision for 300 hours of University Community Service (known as TCU) as part of their degree requirements. Another 18 non-Christian religious groups have been targeted for field research by PROLADES in Costa Rica during the next few years (see <http://www.prolades.com/prolades1/profiles/crinrmsp.htm> ).

It is obvious that the majority of nominal Roman Catholics in Central America have many more options to chose from now than previously if they decide to change their religious affiliation, and some are choosing to join marginal Christian groups or non-Christian religions. The fact that the percentage of those with “**no religious affiliation**” is growing in the region means that more people are becoming less religious as a product of the secularization of society in general.

## Conclusion

We have documented some of the historical and cultural changes that have taken place in Central American society since the discovery of America, and we have clarified the current situation of ethnic and religious diversity in the region, as well as some of the challenges that this represents for the future.

Today, there is greater ethnic diversity in Central America than in 1821 as a result of the continuous immigration of foreign-born persons of different cultural backgrounds who have resisted assimilation to Hispanic culture and are not fluent in Spanish, except for the situation in the country of Belize, which is an English-speaking nation with a British heritage and that does not fit the assimilation patterns of the Spanish-speaking countries in the region. However, Belize is becoming more like its neighbor countries because of the immigration of Spanish-speaking mestizos, mainly from Mexico and Guatemala but also from El Salvador, which has caused this traditionally Protestant nation to become more Roman Catholic today than Protestant in terms of religious affiliation. This is a reversal of the general trend taking place in most of Central America.

We have observed and documented the shift in religious affiliation in the Spanish-speaking countries of Central America since 1960, typically away from the Roman Catholic Church and toward Evangelical groups. As we noted previously, this has led Dr. Charles Denton (CID-Gallup Latin America research group in Costa Rica) to project that by the year 2025 more than 50% of all Central Americans will be Protestants if the current trend continues.

If one or more Spanish-speaking countries in Central America become less than 50% Roman Catholic during the next few decades, this could cause a major shift in the political and social configuration of the region in terms of relationships with neighboring countries and with the US, which is perceived to be a Protestant nation even though today less than 50% of the total US population is Protestant according to the latest public opinion polls.

**This changing reality should motivate Protestant religious, civil and political leaders to reconsider their leadership role in their respective nations and to take greater responsibility for helping improve socioeconomic conditions and the social welfare of the middle and lower income groups, especially for those living in poverty.** Traditionally, evangelicals in Central America have been less involved in politics and civil society than their Roman Catholic neighbors in helping to resolve societal problems, partially because evangelicals have perceived of themselves as a religious minority without much political power.

**What will the future bring to the Central American region as a result of these changes in the ethnic and religious composition of society?** Will socioeconomic conditions improve or worsen for those at the lower levels of society? Will there be less public and private corruption, drug trafficking, gang violence and crime in the streets, and social anxiety over unemployment and the high cost of living as well as housing, health, education and welfare issues in coming decades because evangelicals will be more involved in the political life of the nation?

If the experience of some evangelicals in Guatemala – such as former presidents Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83), Jorge Elías Serrano (1991-93) and Alfonso Portillo (2002-04) – is taken into consideration, then more evangelical involvement in Central American politics and government may seem somewhat risky and problematic. Evangelical politicians Montt and Portillo are the least popular personalities in that country, receiving 74% and 71% of negative opinions, respectively, in March 2004. Seven out of ten respondents (72%) believe that Portillo left the country “worse off” than it was when he became president after Álvaro Arzú stepped down. The social backlash from the Montt and Serrano corruption scandals in Guatemala may have helped to curtail protestant population growth in that nation for more than a decade, which remained at about 25% for most of the 1990s (Grossman 2001).

This ought to challenge us all to do some serious reflection about what our own role is in helping to improve human society in our own neighborhoods, regardless of our ethnicity and our religious affiliation.

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# Appendices

## APPENDIX I

### Ethnic Immigration to Central America, 1492-2005

Compiled by Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES  
(Last modified on August 2, 2005)

DATES	EVENTS
1492 and following	The arrival of <b>Spanish colonists and Spanish Catholic missionaries</b> who represented both the official doctrinal position of the Roman Catholic Church in Rome as well as the “popular or folk Catholicism” of Medieval Europe, specifically of Spain (Dussel 1981:82-86). The beginning of the forced subjugation and conversion of the American Indians, and later of the African slaves, by Spanish civil and religious authorities. <b>Millions of Amerindians and African slaves died of mistreatment and disease during the first 100 years of Spanish colonialism.</b> The interbreeding of male Spanish colonists with female Amerindians during the next two centuries produced a majority population of <b>Mestizos, called “the cosmic race.”</b>
1500s-1800s	<b>Spanish (Roman) Catholic Church established in Central America among Spanish colonists, subjugated American Indians and African slaves</b> in each of the provinces under the Vice Royalty of New Spain in Mexico that received its authority from the Spanish Crown. The territory now known as the nation of Panama was under the Vice Royalty of New Granada in Bogotá, Colombia.
1440s-1850s	<b>African slaves</b> came to the Americas via the Atlantic slave trade by the Dutch, Portuguese, English, French and Spanish. However, few of these slaves were brought directly to Central America; those that were brought to Central America were largely assimilated into the larger <b>Mestizo</b> population over time.
1700-1800s	<b>English trading settlements</b> were established along the Caribbean shore of Central America, from Belize in the north to Panama in the south; the British colony of Belize (called British Honduras in the early days) was established in the late 1700s. <b>The Anglican Church</b> was established among <b>White European settlers</b> in the late 1700s and early 1800s; St. John’s Anglican Cathedral was built in Belize City in 1815 (this is the oldest Protestant church in Central America). The <b>London Baptist Missionary Society</b> (founded in London in 1795) began work in Belize in 1822. The <b>Presbyterian Church of Scotland</b> was established Belize City in 1825. <b>Black West Indian immigrants</b> from Jamaica and other British-controlled islands arrived to work in the logging industry and in agricultural and fishing activities; many of these new immigrants had become <b>Protestants (affiliated with Methodist, Baptist, Brethren, Moravian and other evangelical churches)</b> ; however, the Anglican Church refused to allow Blacks to become church members until the mid-1800s.
1797	<b>The British government deported thousands of rebellious Garífunas</b> (a mixed Indian and Black ethnic group that developed their own culture, language and religion; they are animists) from the island of St. Vincent in the Eastern Caribbean to the Bay Islands off the north coast of Honduras. By the early 1800s, the Garífunas had migrated to the coast of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, where they remain today.
1807-1820	Many European countries outlawed the <b>Atlantic Slave Trade</b> , which eventually created a labor shortage in the Caribbean basin.
1821-1838	<b>Independence of Central American countries from Spain and Mexico.</b> Liberal governments passed the first laws to allow for religious tolerance during the 1840s, such as Costa Rica (1848). During this period the first significant <b>immigration of Black West</b>

- Indians** (mainly from Jamaica and Barbados) occurred, starting in 1825, along the Caribbean coast of Central America.
- 1844-1917 **East Indian (Hindi) “contract laborers”** arrived in Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad-Tobago, Belize and elsewhere to work in agricultural and logging activities. Today, the largest populations of East Indians in Central America are found in Panama (108,000), Belize (8,700) and Honduras (a few thousand).
- 1848-1869 **The California Gold Rush** brought tens of thousands of travelers to Panama and Nicaragua for transit from the Atlantic to Pacific Oceans en route to California.
- 1849 German missionaries of the **Moravian Church** arrived in Bluefields, Nicaragua, to begin church work among the **native Miskito Indians and West Indian immigrants** on the Caribbean shore of Nicaragua and Honduras. Eventually, most Miskito Indians and many West Indians became members of the Moravian Church in Nicaragua and Honduras.
- 1850-1855 Construction of the **Panama Railroad** across the isthmus of Panama, from Colón on the Caribbean Sea to Panama City on the Pacific Ocean; most of the construction workers were imported **Chinese** contract laborers and **Black West Indian** immigrants from English and French-speaking Caribbean islands. **The Anglican Church** was established in the port city of Colón (called Aspinwall) in 1850; Christ-by-the-Sea Anglican Church was constructed in Colón during the 1850s.
- 1850-1900 **European immigrants arrived in major cities of the region for commercial purposes;** beginning of European import and export activities from Central America to Europe and North America: coffee, lumber and mining production. **The Church of the Good Shepherd** (nondenominational at first and later affiliated with the **Protestant Episcopal Church**) was founded in San José, Costa Rica, in 1865 by European and North American immigrants.
- 1860s During the 1860s new laws were passed in Costa Rica to allow for the temporary immigration of **Blacks and Orientals** due to a labor shortage and the need for cheap unskilled labor. **Groups of Chinese “contract laborers”** (two-year contracts) arrived in Central America to work in agriculture and construction projects, such on coffee farms in the Central Valley and railroad building from coast-to-coast in Costa Rica, and as farm laborers in British Honduras (now called Belize), especially in the Toledo district. The early Chinese immigrants practiced **traditional Ancestor worship (and shamanism and Qigong = traditional medicine) or Buddhism**, but many were eventually converted to **Roman Catholicism**.
- 1860-1914 **Arab immigration from the Ottoman Empire** to Central America (first in Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua and later in Guatemala, Belize, Costa Rica and Panama) of **Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian origin**. The majority of these Arab immigrants were **Eastern Orthodox Christians**, although some studies reveal that between 15 and 20% were Muslims. **Today, most of the Arabs in the region are Roman Catholics, even though a minority still practice the Orthodox faith or are Muslims.**
- 1870-1940 **This was a period of accelerated immigration to Central America from many countries;** for example, in Costa Rica between 20% and 25% of the population growth could be attributed to immigration, particularly of **Spaniards, Chinese, West Indians, Nicaraguans, French, Germans, Italians and Jews**. **Thou-sands of Italian, Chinese and Black West Indian workers** arrived in Costa Rica during the 1870s and 1880s to work on the construction of the Atlantic Railroad, from San José in the central highlands to port Limón on the Caribbean coast. During the 1890s, the Costa Rican government decided to hire mainly European contract laborers (principally **Spaniards and Scandinavians**) to build the Pacific Railroad, from San José to Puntarenas on the Pacific Ocean. In 1897, the Costa Rican Congress passed a law that prohibited further immigration of **Negroes and citizens of China**, and during the 1930 restrictions were placed on the immigration of **European Jews** (mainly from Poland).
- 1880s-1920s **Beginning of the banana plantations and export industry controlled by North American companies** (such as United Fruit and Standard Brands) on the Caribbean

coast of Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras; these companies also built local railroad lines to facilitate banana exportation. **Most of the laborers were English-speaking Blacks from the West Indies who were members of Protestant churches prior to their arrival in Central America.**

- 1882-1888 The French attempt to build a transisthmian Canal in Panama with **tens of thousand of immigrant laborers from many countries**, 25,000 of whom died of disease during this period. Most of the construction workers were **West Indian and Chinese laborers**. The **Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society of Jamaica** began work in Panama among West Indian canal workers; later, missionary work was begun in Costa Rica in 1894.
- 1880s **The Jamaican Baptist Missionary Society** (founded in 1842) began missionary work in Central America among the **Black West Indians** (now called "Creoles") in Belize and Costa Rica (1887).
- 1880-1940 Although **Sephardim Jews** (from the Iberian Peninsula) were present in Central America during the Spanish Colonial period (16th - 18th centuries) and other **Jewish merchants** arrived during the 19th century, there was little Jewish presence in the region until the 1880s when Jews from Eastern Europe (called **Ashkenazi Jews from Poland, Russia and Rumania**) began to arrive due to hardships in their homelands. The largest number of Polish-Jewish immigrants (called "polacos") to Costa Rica arrived between 1930-1936. Small Jewish colonies were established throughout Central America by 1940, especially in Panama and Costa Rica. **Today, Jews in Central America represent the Orthodox and Reform traditions.** However, hundreds of Jews left the region for safe haven in other countries during the armed conflicts that plagued Central America (except Costa Rica) during the period 1960-1996.
- 1882-1925 **First Protestant missionaries begin to arrive from North America to work among the Spanish-speaking population:** the **Presbyterian Church USA** began work in Guatemala in 1882; the fundamentalist **Central America Mission** in Costa Rica in 1891 (and during the next decade in all of Central America); the **Seventh-day Adventist Church** in Honduras (1891); the **Pentecostal Mission** (a Holiness body from Nashville, TN) in Guatemala (1901); the **California Friends (Quakers)** in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras (1902); the **Church of the Nazarene** in Guatemala (1915); the **Pilgrim Holiness Church** in Guatemala (1917); the **Methodist Church** in Costa Rica (1917); the **Latin America Mission** in Costa Rica (1921), etc. Most of the other Protestant missionary societies that arrived in Central America did so after the end of World War II in 1945.
- 1904-1914 **The building of the Panama Canal and the establishment of the Panama Canal Zone** by the U.S. government in the newly independent state of Panama (which previously was a province of Colombia) brought **thousands of immigrant workers** to Panama after 1904. By 1913 approximately 65,000 men were on the payroll of the Panama Canal Company. **Most were West Indians**, although some 12,000 workers were recruited from southern Europe (**mainly Italians and Greeks**). Five thousand U.S. citizens filled the administrative, professional and supervisory jobs. To provide these men with the comforts and amenities to which they were accustomed, a paternalistic community was organized in the Canal Zone with churches for everyone in a segregated environment: the **Salvation Army** in 1904; the **Southern Baptist Convention** in 1905; the **Methodist Church** in 1906; the **Church of God of Anderson, Indiana**, in 1906; and the **Free Methodist Church** in 1913 mainly served the White population in the Canal Zone. The Wesleyan Methodist Church conducted work among the West Indian laborers with pastors from Jamaica.
- Early 1900s Local railroad lines were built on the Caribbean coast to accommodate the expanding banana export industry in Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras. **By 1920, small numbers of those of foreign origin -- Chinese, European Jews, Arabs (Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians), Greeks, South Asians (mainly East Indian Hindus), Western Europeans (mainly British, German and Italian) and North Americans -- were present in the region.**

1904-1945	Beginning of the <b>“Free Apostolic” Pentecostal movement</b> in El Salvador under independent Canadian missionary Frederick Mebius; the <b>“Jesus Only” Pentecostal movement</b> in León, Nicaragua (1914); the <b>Pentecostal Holiness Church</b> in Costa Rica (1918); the <b>Foursquare Church</b> in Panama (1928); the <b>Assemblies of God</b> in El Salvador (1930); and the <b>Church of God of Cleveland-TN</b> in Guatemala (1932). Most of the other Pentecostal groups that exist today in the region did not arrive in Central America until the 1950s or later. All of these missionary organizations sought to win converts among the Spanish-speaking and/or indigenous populations in Central America.
1936-1939	<b>During and after the Spanish Civil War, many Spaniards immigrated to Central America.</b> Costa Rica, for example, has a large community of <b>Catalonians</b> from the province of Barcelona who are fervent Roman Catholics and devotees of the Black Virgin of Montserrat. Also, many <b>Basque and Italian immigrants</b> arrived in the region, especially in Costa Rica.
1941-1945	<b>The outbreak of World War II</b> in Europe and the Pacific curtailed immigration to Central America until after the end of WWII, in 1945.
After 1945	<b>Thousands of White English-speaking immigrants</b> from the USA, Canada and Britain have created enclaves of foreign-born residents in many areas of Central America, especially in the larger cities and in the beach communities. Among them are many retired people from North America and Europe. Many of these recent immigrants arrived with their own brand of religion, which they practiced in their country of origin; many so-called “new religious movements” were introduced to Costa Rica during this period, especially the non-Christian variety.
1960s-1990s	<b>Costa Rica</b> , in particular, received <b>thousands of Spanish-speaking political refugees from South American countries</b> during a conflictive era of repressive right-wing military dictatorships (mainly from <b>Argentina, Chile, Bolivia and Peru</b> ), as well as waves of political and economic refugees from <b>Nicaragua</b> during the right-wing Somoza dynasty and, later, during the left-wing Sandinista government. Today, Costa Rica has approximately 300,000 permanent residents from Nicaragua and a seasonal influx of another 100,000-150,000 agricultural workers from <b>Nicaragua and Panama</b> . The majority of the political refugees from other Central American countries sought asylum in Mexico or the USA, although a small number of these refugees came to Costa Rica as well.
1980s to present	The arrival of a growing number of <b>Chinese immigrants</b> to Central America from Taiwan and from Mainland China began a new era for the existing Chinese communities in Panama, Costa Rica and other countries. The first wave represented immigration from Taiwan, but during the 1990s Chinese immigrants began arriving from Hong Kong. Today, there are four main language groups of Chinese in the region: <b>Yue-Cantonese, Hakka, Mandarin and Taiwanese-Min Nan</b> . Sources indicate that there are about 100,000 Chinese (mainly Cantonese, Hakka and Mandarin-speaking) in <b>Panama</b> today, about 50,000 Chinese (mainly Mandarin-speaking) in <b>Costa Rica</b> , about 20,000 Chinese (mainly Cantonese-speaking) in <b>Guatemala</b> , and about 8,200 Chinese (mainly Mandarin-speaking) in <b>Belize</b> . <b>Panama</b> has two Chinese daily newspapers and Latin America’s only Chinese radio station that broadcasts in several Chinese dialects. Panama’s large Chinese community has its own school, Sun Yat-sen School, built with a contribution of 2 million dollars from the Taiwanese government; the school teaches students in Mandarin and 40% of the student body is non-Chinese. During the 1980s, officials of the Panamanian and Honduran governments sold travel documents to tens of thousands of Chinese from Mainland China and Hong Kong. Immigration from China, much of it illegal, still continues today. There are a dozen or so <b>Chinese Baptist churches</b> , as well as those of other denominations, in Panama and Costa Rica, that use one or more of the main Chinese dialects. However, the majority of these immigrants are practitioners of <b>traditional Chinese Ancestor worship or Buddhism. Some are followers of Daoism (also called Taoism).</b>
1980s to present	Many <b>Korean businessmen and administrative personnel</b> of Korean-owned companies and their families began arriving in Central America (mainly in Panama, Costa Rica and Honduras) for commercial purposes: to take advantage of growing investment opportunities in the region, to establish distribution plants for Korean products and/or to

build and operate manufacturing plants mainly for the export clothing industry. There are three **Korean-speaking evangelical churches in Costa Rica**, and one Korean-led missionary organization is engaged in church planting among several Indigenous groups as well as the Spanish-speaking population. However, some of the new Korean arrivals are **Buddhists**.

1990s to present

Costa Rica, in particular, experienced an influx of **Russian immigrants** during the 1990s, now numbering over 5,000, many of whom are adherents of the **Russian Orthodox faith**. In addition, about 10,000 **Colombians** have immigrated to Costa Rica in search of a safe haven from the violence in their homeland.

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## APPENDIX II

### CONTENTS OF THE PROLADES CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS\*

\*SOURCE: Clifton L. Holland, *Toward a Classification System of Religious Groups in the Americas by Major Traditions and Family Types* (San José, Costa Rica: PROLADES, 2004a).

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APPENDIX III

**A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE  
IN LATIN AMERICA**

by Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES

23 February 2003

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The following documents are outlines of seminar materials used to provoke reflection and discussion on these topics:

**The Contemporary Context of Religious Pluralism in Latin America**

**Defining Apostasy and Conversion**

**Why are Roman Catholics leaving their Church to join Evangelical Churches?**

**Why are Evangelicals leaving their churches to join "other religious groups" or to stop participating in any religious group?**

**Table of Attraction and Rejection Factors that affect the growth of Catholic and Evangelical churches**

**Catholic Perspectives on NRMs**

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SOURCE: <http://www.prolades.com/prolades1/documents/desertion/religion-change.htm>

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[Note: Between **1977-1986**, PROCADES-PROLADES produced this series of **National Directories of the Protestant Movement** for each country of Central America in Spanish, with the exception of Belize, which was published in English. Holland was the project director and general editor of this series.]

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