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

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RELIGION IN EL SALVADOR

Country Summary

This is the smallest of the Spanish-speaking countries in Central America, bordered by Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua in the north, east and south, respectively. El Salvador, known as Cuscatlán ("Land of the Jewel") by the indigenous peoples, is a spectacular land of volcanoes, rolling hills and lakes, with a long uninterrupted beach along the Pacific coast. The country has an area of 8,124 square miles (21,040 km²) and a population of 5,744,113 (2007 census). El Salvador has the highest population density in Central America. The nation is divided into 14 departments, which have a total of 262 municipalities.

In 2004, approximately 3.2 million Salvadorans were living outside El Salvador, with the USA traditionally being the destination of choice for Salvadorans looking for greater economic opportunities. Many Salvadorans also live in neighboring Central American countries. The majority of expatriates emigrated during the civil war of the 1980s for political reasons and later because of adverse economic and social conditions in El Salvador.

The nation's largest city and its capital is San Salvador, founded in 1545. Today, there are 1,566,629 inhabitants in the **San Salvador**

Metropolitan Area, which is composed of the municipality of San Salvador and the surrounding urban area of 18 municipalities in the Department of San Salvador. Spanish is the nation's official language and is spoken by virtually all inhabitants. Only a few indigenous people still speak their native tongues, but all speak Spanish as well.

An estimated 90 percent of Salvadorans are *mestizo* (mixed Amerindian and Spanish origin) and culturally known as *ladino*; nine percent are reported to be White: this population is mostly of Spanish descent but it includes others of European and North American descent (mainly French, German, Swiss and Italian); and only about one percent is Amerindian. Very few Native Americans have retained their ancient customs, traditions or languages. There is also a large community of Nicaraguans, 100,000 according to some estimates, many of whom are seasonal migrant workers.

Before the Spanish conquest, the land now known as El Salvador was inhabited by three main Amerindian peoples who governed their respective territories: an estimated population of 460,000 in 1524. By the time the Spanish arrived, Pipil and Pokoman Maya settlements were interspersed throughout western El Salvador, from the Lempa River to the border with Guatemala. The Pipil are related linguistically to the nomadic Nahuas (Uto-Aztec: Nahuatl) who settled in central Mexico and created the great Aztec civilization. The dominant Pipil organized a nation known as *Cuzcatlán*, with at least two centralized city-states that may have



been subdivided into smaller principalities. They have had a strong influence on the current culture of El Salvador, with a large portion of the population claiming ancestry from this and other Amerindian groups. The eastern region of present-day El Salvador was populated by the Lencas (probably Macro-Chibchan) who also settled in the western highlands of Honduras. The northern region of the Lempa River was populated by a Mayan people, the Chortí, who dominated in the adjacent regions of southeastern Guatemala and northwestern Honduras. The cultural and religious center of the Chortí was located at Copán in Honduras, which dominated the Old Empire Mayan civilization. The Pipil and their remaining Mayan-speaking neighbors firmly resisted Spanish occupation of their homeland. However, the Amerindians of El Salvador were decimated by warfare and disease as a result of Spanish colonization between 1524 and 1550.

Most of the national territory has been deforested by centuries of agricultural development and soil erosion has affected over 50 percent of the country, causing El Salvador to have the most severely degraded environment in the region. Most of the nation's wildlife has disappeared because of the destruction of the primary and secondary forests as a result of clearing the land for pasture, coffee and cotton production, and the need for fuel for wood-burning stoves still used by most of the country's large peasant population, of which 70 percent live in poverty.

El Salvador has witnessed progress toward greater economic and political stability during the 1990s and into the 21st century, despite the fluctuations of the world economy that have affected traditional exports (mainly coffee and textiles), the revitalized manufacturing sector, the balance of payments (trade deficit and international loans), tourism and other areas of the economy. One of the most important economic factors in the 1990s and early 2000s was growth in the amount of remittances from relatives living abroad, which helped Salvadoran families to survive the hardships and boosted the nation's staggering economy.

Now, the perpetual problems of political stability, economic development, land reform, healthcare, education, public security, reconstruction and reconciliation are being addressed by the country's leaders in a peaceful manner. However, Salvadoran society is still torn by historical animosities and conflicts between the wealthy elite and the masses of poverty-stricken peasants. The nation is also plagued by natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, hurricanes, and seasonal droughts and flooding. In October 1986, a disastrous earthquake hit San Salvador, killing 1,500 and displacing 10,000 families while causing an estimated \$1.5 billion in damage.

Current Religious Situation

The country's religious landscape has also become divided since the early 1900s, with the arrival of scores of Protestant missionary agencies, mainly from the U.S., and the emergence of a strong national Evangelical movement, particularly since the 1960s, which have challenged the historically dominant position of the Roman Catholic Church in El Salvador. However, the Constitution explicitly recognizes the Roman Catholic Church and grants it special legal status.

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contribute to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution states that all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, sex, or religion.

A series of public opinion polls between 1988 and 2008 that included information about "religious affiliation" in El Salvador give us a clear picture of what has taken place in this nation. Between 1988 and 1995 two studies revealed that no significant changes had taken place in

religious affiliation since the mid-1980s. The first was conducted in 1988 by researchers at the Central American University in San Salvador, which revealed that 67.1 percent of the total population were Catholics, 16.4 percent Protestants, 4.8 percent other religions, and 14.7 percent no religion/no response. The second was done in 1995 by CID-Gallup and showed that Catholics were 67.8 percent of the population, Protestants 16.8 percent, other religions 2.3 percent and no religion/no response 13 percent.

However, between 1995 and 2004, new polls showed a marked increase in the size of the Protestant population, from 16.8 percent to 25.0 percent (CID-Gallup September 2000, UT-COP October 2003 and IUDOP-UCA March 2004), with a corresponding decrease in those affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church: from 67.9 percent in 1995 to 56.5 in 2004, a decline of 11.4 percent. All of these studies had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5-3.0 percent.

This trend continued between 2004 and 2008, with the Protestant population increasing from 25.0 percent to 34.4 percent while the Catholic population declined from 65.5 percent to 50.9 percent (IUDOP-UCA June 2006, November 2006, November 2007 and May 2008; UT-COP October 2006; and CID-Gallup June 2007). Whereas an evangelical study published in 1993 claimed that the Protestant population was then over 30 percent of the total population (with more than 4,200 congregations and 514,286 baptized members), in reality this did not happen until the end of 2007 (29.5 percent in November 2007, according to IUDOP-UCA).

On the other hand, the size of the population segment grouped together as "other," "none" or "no answer" has fluctuated in the polls taken between 1988 and 2008, with a high of 24.3 percent in September 2000 to a low of 14.7 percent in May 2008. On the latter date, the respondents were listed as follows: "other religions" 1.1 percent and "none"/"no answer" 13.6 percent.

Overall, between 1988 and 2008, the Roman Catholic population declined from 67.1 percent to 50.9 percent (-16.2 percent), the Protestant population increased from 16.4 percent to 34.4 percent (+18.0 percent), and those in the combined category "other," "none" or "no answer" declined from 19.5 percent to 14.7 percent (-4.8 percent), which means that during the past 20 years there has been a significant increase in the size of the Protestant population to the detriment of the population segments listed as "Catholic" and "none/no religion."

A later public opinion poll conducted by Villacorta & Asociados during August-September 2008 reported the following results at the national level: Catholic 49.4 percent, Protestant 25.3 percent, other religions 1.8 percent, and none/no answer 23.6 percent.

It appears that one of the consequences of the end to the nation's civil war (1980-1992), which was followed by a period of relative peace and prosperity after decades of political violence and bloodshed, was a radical shift in religious affiliation from Catholic to Protestant (along with a slight decline in those who previously were religiously indifferent, agnostic and/or atheist); and a trend toward greater civic and political participation by evangelicals (most were previously apolitical publically) who have lost their fear of expressing their political views and becoming involved in social justice and human rights issues in the national context of free and democratic elections and a decline in political violence.

Overview of social, political and religious development

By 1525, Pedro de Alvarado, one of the cruelest Spanish *conquistadores*, had subdued – with extreme brutality – most of the Amerindian population of Central America. The territory of El Salvador became part of the Captaincy-General of Guatemala during the Spanish colonial

period, and for some time after independence was part of a federated Republic of Central America (1821-1838) until achieving its full independence in 1838.

The young nation experienced a series of political struggles, assassinations and revolutions until 1886, when Conservative rule brought about political stability for the next 45 years. During this period communal Amerindian lands were privatized, coffee became the main crop, and the coffee oligarchy consolidated its control of the country's political, economic and social life.

The enormous profits that coffee yielded as a monoculture export served as an impetus for the concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy of a few families (less than 100). A succession of presidents from the ranks of the Salvadoran oligarchy, nominally both Conservative and Liberal, throughout the last half of the 19th century generally agreed on a series of basic policies: the promotion of coffee as the predominant cash crop; the development of needed infrastructure – railroads and port facilities – mainly in support of the coffee trade; the elimination of Amerindian communal landholdings to facilitate further coffee production; the passage of anti-vagrancy laws to ensure that displaced *campesinos* (landless farm workers) and other rural residents provided sufficient labor for the coffee plantations (called *fincas*); and the suppression of rural discontent among the landless peasants. In 1912, President Manuel Enrique Araujo Rodríguez, who governed from 1911-1913, created the National Guard as a rural police force to ensure public order, and he created “justices of the peace” in all the country's municipalities to ensure the rule of law throughout the country.

Government decrees abolished Pipil communal land holdings in 1881-1882, which opened the way for coffee producers to increase their land holdings. The Pipil were, and still are, concentrated in the western departments of Sonsonate, La Libertad, Ahuachapán, and to a lesser degree in Santa Ana. As coffee production expanded in the western departments, the Pipil population suffered increasing displacement, which forced them to join the growing labor pool of landless and land-poor peasants who were forced by economic necessity to work on the coffee plantations, especially during harvest season. *It was in this context of social dislocation and labor unrest during the period 1900-1930 that the early Protestant churches took root and expanded in the western region.*

From 1931 – the year of the coup in which **Gen. Maximiliano Hernández Martínez** (1882-1966) came to power until he was deposed in 1944 – there was brutal suppression of any resistance to the military government. Until 1980, all but one Salvadoran temporary president was an army officer. Periodic presidential elections were seldom free or fair, which meant that *a virtual military dictatorship controlled El Salvador from 1931 to the 1980s.*

During the 1930s, the military-dominated Salvadoran government, seeking to maintain public order and to find out more about the growing Pentecostal movement, passed a law requiring that each pastor secure a license to preach and that he present a list of his members, the name of the church, the names and addresses of the church officials and meeting places, a schedule of church activities, etc. This regulation was intended to bring control and order out of a very disorderly religious movement, by forcing church leaders to organize themselves and establish greater discipline in their religious activities, thus eliminating some of the excesses that were causing the movement to become “a public nuisance” – such as conducting noisy meetings that lasted until all hours of the night, sometimes all night long, and causing alarm among their neighbors with reports of miracles, healings, speaking in unknown tongues, visions, dreams, and prophecy, etc. These so-called “disturbing activities” were creating a lot of confusion at a time when the government was concerned about “communist activities” in the labor movement, along with possible insurrection among the peasants, during the difficult days of the Great Depression that was sweeping the world during the 1930s.

These tensions eventually led to a brief peasant labor uprising in January 1932 in western El Salvador, in which tens of thousands of Pipil and *campesinos* participated; however, reprisals against the insurgents and their supports were swift and severe – estimates of the slaughter run from 15,000 to 50,000 – by repressive military forces under Gen. Hernández Martínez (ruled from 1931 to 1944), who had recently taken over the government. Hernández Martínez was a “spiritualist” (a proponent of Theosophy) who often consulted with “occult powers” through spirit-mediums, psychics and clairvoyants for guidance in running the government. The consequences of the 1932 massacre were devastating for the Amerindian population: virtually all Amerindians working on Salvadoran coffee plantations were killed during their revolt against oppressive living and working conditions.

During the repression against dissidents by the Hernández Martínez regime, virtually all forms of association in the countryside ended, except for church congregations, which allowed the existing Pentecostal, Baptist and Central American Mission-related congregations to survive and grow within their respective communities despite the adverse social, economic and political climate of the 1930s and 1940s. Although the National Guard occasionally harassed the evangelicals, the military officers tended to look on church gatherings as politically harmless and morally credible.

From the 1930s to the 1970s, authoritarian right-wing governments employed political repression and limited reform to maintain power, despite the trappings of democracy. The conservative-led **National Conciliation Party** was in power from the early 1960s until 1979.

In 1969, a so-called **Soccer War** was fought between El Salvador and Honduras that lasted only about four days. It was caused by political conflicts between the two countries, namely unresolved border disputes and issues concerning Salvadoran immigrants in Honduras.

Due to overpopulation in El Salvador, Salvadorans spilled over into Honduran territory, an estimated 300,000 of them. Most of these were *campesinos* that tended plots of land in previously undeveloped areas in Honduran territory. Many *campesinos* did all right for themselves, and so did those who found jobs in Honduran factories. Resentment against them, however, developed among Hondurans, particularly in rural areas. Adding to the tensions between the two countries was the fact that certain sections of the common border had never been clearly defined. Various attempts were made to control the immigration problem by agreements between the two countries. A further aggravating factor was the passage of an agrarian reform law by Honduras, which took land away from some of the Salvadoran immigrants.

These tensions between the two countries coincided with rioting that occurred during the second round of the 1970 FIFA World Cup soccer matches that took place in both countries on 6 and 15 June. For three days following the latter match, Salvadoran stores and shops selling Salvadoran goods were attacked in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and the attacks spread into interior areas. A flow of refugees began moving into Salvador, sometimes as many as 1,400 a day. They told tales of disorganized groups of Honduran hoodlums who terrorized them. Some of the Salvadorans were told to get out of Honduras or the hoodlums would return to burn down their houses. There were some reported incidents of rape and murder. Many of the Salvadorans took heed, hurriedly sold their properties at low prices and fled to their homeland in cars, buses and afoot. A reliable estimate was that more than 17,000 refugees crossed the border in June.

On 14 July, during the morning hours, three Honduran fighter planes entered Salvadoran territory and reportedly made strafing runs. At 1700 that day, Salvadoran military aircraft struck Tegucigalpa’s airport, Toncontin, which was utilized by both civilian and military aircraft. Salvadoran military planes also struck at El Poy, Amapala, Choluteca and Santa Rosa de Copán.

Early the next morning, Honduran warplanes attacked Ilopango, the San Salvador airport, which was also used by both military and commercial aircraft. Honduran planes also attacked a refinery and industrial complex at the town of Acajutla, El Salvador's main seaport. The third target area for Honduran aircraft was El Cutuco, in La Unión, the principal seaport for importing petroleum. However, both air forces were small and poorly equipped with World War II-vintage aircraft, and no major damage occurred in either country.

Hours after Salvadoran aircraft attacked Honduran targets, Salvadoran troops crossed the border and invaded Honduran territory. The Salvadoran Army launched major offensives along the two main roads connecting the two nations. At first, the Salvadoran military units made fairly rapid progress. By the evening of 15 July, the Salvadoran Army, which was considerably larger and better equipped than its Honduran opponent, had advanced into Honduras and taken the departmental capital of Nueva Ocotepeque and eight other cities. Thereafter, the Salvadoran's ground offensive bogged down. There were other skirmishes along the border as well during the brief military conflict. However, the Organization of American States (OAS) negotiated a cease-fire that took effect on 20 July, with the Salvadoran troops withdrawing from Honduran territory in early August.

The actual war had lasted just over four days, but it would take more than a decade to arrive at a final peace settlement. Both sides of the Football War suffered casualties. In Honduras, about 100 combat troops and over 2,000 civilians were killed over a four-day period because most of the battles were fought on Honduran soil. Thousands of people had been ultimately made homeless as well. Trade between Honduras and El Salvador was greatly disrupted and the international border was officially closed. This severely damaged the economies of these nations and threatened the functioning of the Central American Common Market (CACM), a trade organization established by treaty between Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica in the early 1960s.

However, an estimated 300,000 Salvadorans were displaced due to the armed conflict. Many Salvadorans were forcibly exiled or fled from the war-torn areas of Honduras and returned to El Salvador. Most of those who fled were forced to provide for themselves with very little assistance at all from any source. Over the next few years, Salvadorans who returned to their native land were surrounded by conditions of overpopulation and extreme poverty.

The social situation worsened in El Salvador as the government proved unable to satisfy the economic needs of its citizens deported or exiled from Honduras. The resulting social unrest was one of the causes of the later civil war in El Salvador.

Finally, on 30 October 1980, the two nations signed a peace agreement to put the border dispute before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. In 1992, the Court awarded most of the disputed territory to Honduras, and in 1998 both countries signed a border demarcation treaty to implement the terms of the ICJ decree. The total land area given to Honduras by El Salvador after the court's ruling was about 374.5 km². Since then, both countries have maintained normal diplomatic and trade relations.

During the 1970s, the political situation in El Salvador began to unravel. In the 1972 presidential election, the opponents of military rule united under **José Napoleón Duarte**, leader of the reformist **Christian Democrat Party**. Due to widespread electoral fraud, Duarte's broad-based reform movement was defeated. Subsequent protests and an attempted coup were crushed and Duarte was exiled.

These events eroded hope of reform through democratic means and persuaded those opposed to the government that armed insurrection was the only way to achieve needed change. Severe political and social inequalities led to widespread peasant opposition to the ruling

oligarchy, which resulted in the **Salvadoran Civil War (1980-1991)**, largely a peasant revolution led by five leftist guerrilla groups that eventually united in 1980 under the banner of the **Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)**. The FMLN was named after the Communist rebel leader Agustín Farabundo Martí Rodríguez (1893-1932), who led workers and peasants in an uprising to transform Salvadoran society after the devastation caused by the eruption of Volcano Izalco in 1932 in western El Salvador.

Following decades of continuous social and political turmoil, the Salvadoran civil war generated the large-scale internal displacement (“*los desplazados*”) of an estimated 265,000 (registered) persons in El Salvador by October 1983, who were forced to leave their homes in embattled areas and wander the countryside in search of a secure town or settlement removed from the violence. The majority of the internally displaced persons – women and young children and the disabled and elderly – were too poor to leave the country; most of the men had been recruited by the Salvadoran Army or by the leftist guerrilla groups, or they had “disappeared” or had been killed. In addition, another 500,000 or more Salvadorans had fled to neighboring countries or to the USA as economic or political “refugees” by late 1983, according to international relief and development agencies.

The chaotic social and political situation in El Salvador during the 1970s and early 1980s produced significant population shifts of “*los desplazados*” who resettled in peripheral areas of the provincial capitals or the nation’s capital, or along roadways or railroad tracks. Technically, they were not considered “refugees” because they had not crossed international boundaries, and the only sources of relief assistance was from the Salvadoran Government (with supplies provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID) or from churches and private voluntary organizations (PVOs). The displaced persons moved into areas where marginalized people had lived for generations, which produced burgeoning slums of poor populations on the periphery of the nation’s larger urban areas.

Many of the displaced persons who received humanitarian and spiritual assistance from evangelical churches and international relief and development agencies also began attending evangelical churches, where tens of thousands were converted to the Protestant Faith and became active members of evangelical churches. Many of the Pentecostal denominations benefited from this situation by successfully attracting displaced persons to their local congregations where they received comfort, encouragement, nurture and a new sense of community, which produced a surge of church growth during the 1970s and 1980s.

During this tragic period of civil war, the international press reported a series of massacres that shocked the nation and the world and that began to sway U.S. public opinion against its government's support of the repressive Salvadoran government, which needed continued U.S. Government assistance to win the war against the Marxist-led revolutionary movement. More than a dozen Roman Catholic priests were killed by right-wing death squads or public security forces during the period 1977-1991, including priest Rutilio Grande (1977), Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of San Salvador (1980), and six Jesuit priests (1989) at the Jesuit-run University of Central America, including the rector. Also, in 1980, four U.S. Catholic nuns and lay-workers were raped and killed by a military patrol near San Salvador, which led to a temporary suspension of U.S. military aid to the Salvadoran Government.

During the 1980s, government-sponsored death squads also assassinated numerous opposition leaders – politicians, businessmen, labor union members, land reform advocates, university professors and students – as well as journalists. In response, the revolutionaries – led by the **FMLN** – retaliated by murdering government officials, policemen, U.S. military and

civilian advisors, and other government supporters, as well as killing thousands of government soldiers during a decade of open warfare.

In May 1980, **Major Roberto D'Aubuisson Arrieta**, after heading a failed coup against the ruling military government (1979-1982), organized the Secret Anti-Communist Army to coordinate rightwing death-squad activities. From 1978 to 1992, before and during the civil war, **D'Aubuisson** commanded secret military and para-military death squads. Among his victims was Archbishop Óscar Romero. On May 7, 1980, six weeks after Romero's assassination, D'Aubuisson and a group of civilians and soldiers were arrested on a farm, where investigators found weapons and documents identifying D'Aubuisson and the civilians as death squad organizers and financiers. However, D'Aubuisson and some of his collaborators managed to flee to exile in Guatemala.

In 1981, D'Aubuisson founded the **Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA)**, which he led from 1980 to 1985, and his party campaigned in the 1982 election. In March 1982, despite alleged electoral fraud and political violence, the Salvadoran legislative election of a Constituent Assembly was a victory for ARENA, which gained 19 of 60 seats, and its allies gained 17 seats. Consequently, D'Aubuisson's supporters were the legislative majority, who then elected **Álvaro Alfredo Magaña Borja** as interim-president (1982-1984) of El Salvador and D'Aubuisson became President of the Constituent Assembly. This marked the beginning of elected governments in the nation after decades of rule by military dictatorships.

During March-May 1984, D'Aubuisson campaigned for the Salvadoran presidency, but he lost to **José Napoleón Duarte** of the Christian Democratic Party, who won 53.6 percent of the electorate. D'Aubuisson claimed fraud and U.S. Government interference on behalf of Duarte. In March 1985, ARENA lost its governing majority in the Salvadoran legislative election. D'Aubuisson resigned as ARENA's president and **Alfredo Cristiani Burkard** became the party's leader. In May 1988, ARENA's presidential candidate was Cristiani, not D'Aubuisson, and Cristiani was elected (1989-1994). In 1992, D'Aubuisson died of cancer at age 47; he never was tried for any of his crimes.

Most of the massacres that occurred during the civil war were attributed to the Salvadoran public security forces, according to an investigation conducted by Human Rights organizations after the conflict ended in January of 1992 with the signing of an UN-sponsored Peace Accord. As part of the Peace Accords, the military and police were purged of those responsible for committing human rights abuses, but only a few of those responsible for torture and "extra-judicial executions" were actually brought to trial. After the civil war ended, the FMLM became a legitimate political party and was allowed to participate in a revived democratic process, including mayoral, legislative and presidential elections.

However, ARENA dominated Salvadoran presidential politics for the next 17 years under Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994), Armando Calderón Sol (1994-1999), Francisco Flores Pérez (1999-2004) and **Elías Antonio Saca González** (2004-2009). The political tide finally turned in the 2009 national election, which was won by **Carlos Mauricio Funes Cartagena**, the candidate of the leftwing FMLN political party, who took office on 1 June 2009.

The Roman Catholic Church

The evangelization of Central America by Catholic missionaries followed the Spanish conquest and occupation of the region in the 1520s. Although the Amerindians in El Salvador had a highly developed religion based on the worship of the forces of nature, there were a number

of parallels between their religious practices and Catholicism, which made Spanish missionary efforts somewhat easier.

Following the defeat of the Amerindian armies by Pedro de Alvarado in 1525, the old gods seemed powerless before the Spanish conquerors and their new religion. The Franciscan friars, after driving out the Indian priests and destroying the images of their gods, offered a new religious system to the Amerindians that was generally accepted by them and superimposed on their old belief systems. Thousands of Amerindians were converted to Catholicism during the Spanish colonial period, when El Salvador was a province and parish of the Captaincy General of Guatemala.

However, due to the chronic shortage of Catholic priests and other religious workers, the people of the smaller towns and villages learned to conduct their religious life with only occasional assistance from the Catholic clergy. To fill this need, the *cofradía*, a voluntary religious association, developed among the people for planning, organizing and paying for local religious celebrations during the year.

The status of the Catholic Church in the post-colonial period changed depending on who was ruling the country, the Conservatives or the Liberals. The first anti-clerical laws were established by a Liberal government in El Salvador in 1824. In 1871, the Liberal revolution proclaimed freedom of thought and religion, removed cemeteries from clerical control, legalized civil marriage, made education non-clerical, and abolished monastic orders. Priests were not allowed to teach in public schools, but private religious schools were permitted. These policies have remained in force until the present, except for the prohibition of religious orders. The government does not contribute in any way to the support of religion, but since 1962 the Church had been allowed to acquire real estate for other than religious purposes. There is no concordat between the Salvadoran Government and the Vatican, but diplomatic representatives are exchanged. The Constitution of 1962 reiterated the separation of Church and State and guarantees religious freedom for all faiths, but precludes the clergy from belonging to political parties and holding public office.

There has always been a shortage of Catholic priests and other religious workers in El Salvador. In 1944, there were 106 parishes with 203 priests and 357 nuns, which increased to 175 parishes, 373 priests, and 803 nuns in 1968. In 1980, among 229 parishes, there were 373 priests (173 diocesan and 200 religious), 70 lay brothers and 735 nuns. In 1970, about 62 percent of the priests and 19 percent of the nuns were native Salvadorans, which is a high percentage of national priests and a low proportion of native nuns compared to other countries of Latin America at that time. The proportion of priests per inhabitant in El Salvador decreased from 1:7,692 in 1970 to 1:9,090 in 1975 and in 1980 was 1:12,860.

In 1980, 200 Catholic priests in El Salvador belonged to religious orders. The most numerous were the Salesians and the Jesuits. About 50 percent of the religious clergy were dedicated to parishes, 20 percent to teaching, 10 percent to the training and preparation of priests, and the rest to work in the archdiocese. The religious priests assigned to parishes were mainly foreign missionaries, mainly from Italy and Spain. The Catholic Church also sponsored 161 private schools with more than 35,000 students. Catholic personnel from the USA included 15 men (six diocesan, five Franciscan, and four Maryknoll) and 13 women (11 nuns and 2 lay workers).

Since the 1920s, the Catholic Church has also been increasingly divided internally between those who have supported the *status quo* – the Conservative alliance of Church and State – and those who have supported a Liberal and progressive agenda, based on defending the human rights of the marginalized sectors of society.

Diverse tensions arose within the Salvadoran Catholic Church during the 1960s and following years, which resulted from challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. These powerful new currents polarized Catholic bishops, priests (diocesan and religious), lay brothers and sisters (members of religious orders), and the laity in general into various factions. **Traditionalists** wanted the Church to remain as it was prior to the reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council (mid-1960s), with an emphasis on apostolic authority, orthodox theology, the sacraments and personal piety. **Reformers** generally supported the Church's post-Vatican II stance of modernization and toleration of diversity based on its official Social Doctrine. **Progressives**, inspired by reforms approved at the Vatican II and Medellín conferences, sought to implement the new vision for "a preferential option for the poor" through social and political action aimed at transforming Salvadoran society and establishing greater social justice through peaceful democratic means. **Radicals** adopted the Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology and advocated violent revolution by the people as a means of overthrowing the Conservative dictatorship and creating a Socialist State that would serve the poor marginalized masses. **Charismatic agents** sought to transform the spiritual and communal life of Catholics by means of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including the "baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues"), rather than by political and social activism. Many Catholic families have been torn apart by armed conflict and forced geographical relocation due to the civil war and by internal conflicts between Conservatives, Liberals and Progressives, both in the political and religious arenas.

Monsignor Luis Chávez y González was Archbishop of San Salvador from 1939 until 1977. During his tenure, the Salvadoran Catholic Church underwent significant changes. The marginal condition of the peasantry, which had been taken for granted by the church's hierarchy, became a source of concern. The traditional approach of charity was seen as ineffective; the growth of Protestantism loomed as a threat to the Roman Catholic faith in the country. The monsignor addressed this situation by promoting the organization of cooperatives in the countryside, which were followed by the formation of Catholic base communities.

Many *campesinos* were encouraged to find new religious meaning in the message of a socially-engaged Jesus and to seek liberation from economic and political oppression, which had significant repercussions. After the armed skirmishes between the army and the Marxist-inspired guerrillas turned into civil war in the 1980s, the Catholic base communities radicalized their activities and became members of peasant associations that provided support for the FMLN.

Relations between the Catholic Church and the State became strained after the rise of Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero to power in January 1977 through a fraudulent election. At about the same time, another Romero, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was appointed Archbishop of San Salvador (1977-1980), apparently the more conservative of the two candidates for that position. However, in a country dominated by terror and injustice, Archbishop Romero soon became a voice for Christian compassion and reason, denouncing the military's systematic repression of the people and pleading for redistribution of land and unification of the country. Romero and other priests began to speak out against the institutionalized injustice and the repression of the government and its military forces. These denunciations and solidarity with the poor and oppressed brought them into serious conflicts with the aristocracy, often called the "fourteen families," who have ruled El Salvador with the support of the military since the early 1930s. Many priests and other religious workers were soon accused of being "Communists" because of their support of the poor and their denunciation of the growing brutal repression by General Romero's security forces against all

opponents. Romero was shot through the heart by a military sniper while celebrating Mass two months after asking U.S. President Jimmy Carter to cease military aid to the Salvadoran Government due to its dismal record on human rights.

The distinguishing feature of the Salvadoran Catholic Church in 1980 was its strong stand on human rights and social justice, based on the pastoral "option for the poor" enunciated by the Latin American Bishops at Medellín in 1968 and reiterated at Puebla in 1979. Between 1977 and the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, many Catholic priests in El Salvador were harassed by government military forces and right-wing terrorist groups that supported the government in its war against a Marxist-led insurrection, with torture and murder the reward for those who voice any opposition to the ruling government.

Right-wing death squads waged an "unholy war" against Catholic priests and laymen who were socially active in support of the rights of the poor and oppressed, which led to the martyrdom of 12 priests (mostly Jesuits) and four U.S. Catholic religious workers, all women, prior to January 1981. An assassin's bullet struck Archbishop Romero in the heart and ended his life in March 1980, while he was saying Mass in San Salvador, thereby silencing his prophetic voice that called military men to obey God rather than man. This was Romero's plea: stop the brutal repression and become defenders of the rights of the poor rather than of the wealthy and powerful. The archbishop's pleas for justice and faithful obedience to the Gospel of Christ brought on his untimely death, but greatly endeared him to the Salvadoran masses who found in him the courage to stand against the Duarte government and support the Democratic Revolutionary Front in popular insurrection.

During the late 1970s, the Catholic Church in El Salvador experienced severe persecution by the military government of Gen. Romero that was condemned by Latin American and North American Catholic bishops in pastoral letters and official declarations, along with support from the International Commission on Human Rights and other organizations.

One of the heroic actions of Archbishop Romero was to establish a legal aid service, *Socorro Jurídico*, to assist people in legal action against violators of human rights, and also to document and publish accounts of assassinations, kidnappings, rapes, tortures, and the destruction of homes, crops, and even entire villages. One of the reported atrocities was the massacre of 600 defenseless peasants at the Sumpul River in May 1980 by Salvadoran military forces, while these refugees were attempting to cross the border into Honduras. Most of the murdered peasants were women and children, along with a few older men, who had fled from combat zones in El Salvador where their villages and homes had been burned and destroyed by government forces. However, the legal aid office was destroyed by military troops in July 1980, when more than 100 soldiers surrounded and occupied the Jesuit High School where the offices of Socorro Jurídico were located. Week by week, the Catholic radio station broadcast reports of these and other atrocities for the whole country to hear, but this voice was silenced by bomb blasts on several occasions. The Catholic Church worked with the International Red Cross and other relief organizations to help refugees in many areas of the country.

The Salvadoran Government became increasingly distrustful of Catholic priests and nuns, especially foreign missionaries, because of the Catholic Church's growing commitment to human rights and social justice in the midst of official repression and violence directed against all who advocate change and reform on behalf of the poor and oppressed. While some Catholic missionaries were deported for alleged political activity, twelve priests were assassinated by right-wing terrorist organizations that strongly support the military government. Most of the murdered priests were Jesuits, but two Maryknoll sisters and two female lay workers from the USA were added to the list of victims in a tragic incident in December 1980. More than 30

Salvadoran priests were forced into exile because of suspected political activity. Therefore, most of the foreign missionaries became engaged in pastoral work due to the increased shortage of parish priests in 1980.

Catholic schools, churches and other institutions became victims of the violence, including the occupation and destruction of many buildings by government security forces and right-wing terrorists, who beat, tortured and murdered thousands of innocent victims. Some Catholic facilities became special targets of destruction, including the Catholic radio station and the Catholic university in San Salvador, but many churches were also attacked by machine-gun fire and bombings, even when filled with worshippers or refugees. The mutilation of bodies was a favorite tactic of rightwing terrorists, who justified their actions as being "defenders of democracy and guardians of the fatherland."

Whereas Archbishop Romero, in the midst of this confusion and violence, became a prophetic voice of an awakened Catholic Church that proclaimed "good news to the poor" and stood with the oppressed in their suffering, his successor Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, S.D.B. (1983-1994), expressed his support for the ruling government junta, which he believed was holding its own ground in the political struggle between the forces of the extreme right and left. Archbishop Rivera y Damas considered the "extreme right" (the oligarchy and its political and military allies) to be the true cause of most of the social and political ills that the country was then facing, while denouncing the forces of the extreme left (the Marxist-inspired guerrilla movement led by the FMLN) for fomenting violent revolution in the country with the backing of Cuba and the Soviet Union for the purpose of establishing a Socialist State.

After Archbishop Rivera y Damas' death in 1994, Bishop Fernando Sáenz Lacalle was appointed as his replacement and served until his retirement in 2008. The current Archbishop is Monseñor José Luis Escobar Alas.

In 2002, the Salvadoran Catholic Church reported eight dioceses with 376 parishes that were served by 429 secular priests and 233 religious priests (a total of 662), in addition to 394 male religious workers (non-ordained brothers in religious orders) and 1,542 female religious workers (nuns). The first diocese was established in San Salvador in 1842, while the dioceses of Santa Ana and San Miguel were formed in 1913. San Vicente was added in 1943, Santiago de María in 1958, and Chalatenango and Zacatecoluca in 1987. The diocese of San Salvador became an archdiocese in 1913 under Archbishop Antonio Adolfo Pérez y Aguilar, who served until his death in 1926.

August 1-7 is a week-long festival in celebration of *El Salvador del Mundo*, the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Savior of the World, which, along with Easter, is one of the most important religious events in the country. During this period, celebrations in honor of Jesus, who is the patron of the nation (El Salvador means "The Saviour" in Spanish), are held in San Salvador ("Holy Redeemer").

November 21 is celebrated as "Day of the Queen of Peace" (*Día de la Reyna de la Paz*) in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is the nation's patron saint. Also celebrated at this time is the Carnival in San Miguel, which is similar to the Mardi Gras of New Orleans, Louisiana. Also, December 12 is celebrated as the "Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe," who is the patron saint of Mexico.

Many Salvadorans are devotees of "The Black Christ of Esquipulas" (*El Cristo Negro de Esquipulas*) in neighboring Guatemala, where pilgrimages are made annually around January 15 to the city of Esquipulas, near the Guatemalan-Honduran border. Images of "The Black Christ of Esquipulas" are found in local sanctuaries in many Central American countries.

The Protestant Movement

The history of the Protestant Movement in El Salvador is distinct from other Central American countries, in that pioneer foreign mission efforts were directed toward the Spanish-speaking population from the very beginning. In other republics, the presence of English-speaking immigrants, largely West Indians, often served as a cultural and linguistic bridge for new missionaries from the USA in their evangelistic and church planting activities prior to engaging in ministry to the Spanish-speaking Ladino or Amerindian populations.

Since the Amerindian groups in El Salvador are predominantly Spanish-speaking, no Christian churches, either Catholic or Protestant, use an Indian dialect. Consequently, there is little obvious distinction between Ladino and Amerindian ethnic groups in terms of general religious practices, and it is difficult to determine the extent of Protestant penetration among the remnants of the Pipil, Lenca and Chortí. However, in the early 1900s, several Protestant missions began work among the Pipil in the southwestern region and the Chortí in the northwestern region of El Salvador using Spanish, and it is assumed that there are still congregations composed largely of Hispanized Amerindian believers.

The earliest Protestant groups to enter El Salvador were the newly-formed **Central American Mission** (now known as CAM International, with headquarters in Dallas, Texas), whose first missionaries arrived in 1896; the **California Friends Mission** (Quakers) in 1902; an independent Canadian Pentecostal missionary, Frederick Mebius, who arrived in 1904; the **American Baptists** in 1911; the Pentecostal Holiness Church (Mr. and Mrs. Amos Bradley, 1912-1918); and the **Seventh-Day Adventists** in 1915.

By 1936, these Protestant church bodies were well established in El Salvador and had achieved some notable success among the general population of Spanish-speaking *mestizos* (mixed Spanish and Indian blood) and the remnant of early Amerindians. The Quakers developed an extensive ministry among the Chortí (Mayan) in a region known as the Three-Nation Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), which includes northwestern El Salvador. However, the Quakers have not prospered as well as other Protestant groups in El Salvador.

Despite numerous stages of growth and decline, the CAM-supported church association has become one of the largest non-Pentecostal denominations in the country. From the establishment of its first church in 1898 in Ilapango, near San Salvador, this independent fundamentalist denomination had planted 25 congregations (churches and missions) with a total of 600 members. In 1936, mission officials reported 21 churches and 83 mission stations in eight of the country's 14 departments, largely due to the efforts of a team of U.S. missionaries and Salvadoran pastors.

In 1935, the CAM-related churches were organized under a national council of leaders and became known as the **Evangelical Church of El Salvador**. In 1978, this association reported 83 churches, 32 missions and over 180 preaching points, with about 6,000 members. By 1992, there were about 140 churches with an estimated 13,000 members.

The **American Baptist Home Mission Society** (formerly known as the Northern Baptist Convention) entered El Salvador in 1911, where it soon developed strong educational and church work, especially in San Salvador and Santa Ana. By 1936, a chain of 19 churches and 50 mission stations had been established with about 1,380 members. Many of the churches were completely under national leadership, and work had begun among the Pipil in the western coastal region, near Santa Ana. The **Baptist Association of El Salvador** was organized in 1934, but the development of trained national leaders was a slow process. In 1978, the association reported 41 churches with 3,665 members; in 1989 there were 57 churches with 5,700 members; however, by 1992 there were only 51 churches with 4,975 members. In the 1970s, several other Baptist

groups began work in El Salvador, but only two had more than 1,000 members in 1978: the **Good Samaritan Baptist Churches** with 15 congregations, the **Miramonte Baptist Church** with 16 congregations, the **Bible Baptist Fellowship**, and the **International Baptist Mission**.

In 1915 the **Seventh-Day Adventist Church** sent a missionary couple to El Salvador, and in 1916 their first church was established in San Salvador. However, the Adventists only reported five churches and 325 members in 1936, an effort that was curtailed due to competition with the growing Pentecostal movement. By 1978, there were 61 Adventist churches and 59 mission stations in the whole country, with a total membership of 12,067. In 2002, the Adventist Yearbook recorded 364 congregations with 116,845 members; and in 2007, there were 593 congregations with 168,937 members.

Three other Adventist-related bodies also exist in El Salvador: the Seventh-Day Adventist Reform Movement, founded in 1956; the Church of God-Seven Day; and the Israelite Church of God.

In 1904 Mebius began one of the first Pentecostal movements in Latin America, known as the **Free Apostolic Churches**. This occurred about two years prior to the world-renown Azusa Street Revival that began in Los Angeles, California, in 1906, which is considered to be the modern-day origin of the Pentecostal Movement. The Pentecostal doctrine preached by Mebius and his Salvadoran assistants became a source of great upheaval within the emerging Salvadoran Evangelical churches, and brought Mebius into conflict with leaders of the CAM-related churches, the American Baptists and the Adventists. Mebius and his helpers traveled throughout the countryside in an itinerant preaching ministry that eventually produced 25 loosely-organized congregations with about 750 baptized members by 1930.

The work founded by Mebius became known as the **Free Apostolic Churches**. However, several splinter groups were also formed among his early converts, such as the Apostolic Church of the Apostles and Prophets (1935) and the Apostolic Church of the Upper Room (1930s). Two other groups follow in this same tradition, the Apostolic Church of God in Christ (1950) and the Apostolic Church of the New Jerusalem (1977), as well as many independent congregations. In 1978, there were at least 50 independent churches with about 3,200 members within the Free Apostolic Movement, as well as 114 churches and 5,500 members among the organized Apostolic Church associations.

After the arrival of the **Assemblies of God** in El Salvador in December 1929, efforts were made to bring some order to this assortment of independent Free Apostolic Churches, but this attempt was only partially successful. In April 1930, twelve of these churches became founding members of the Assemblies of God, whose first missionaries had entered the country at the request of Francisco Ramírez Arbizu, one of the leading pastors in the Free Apostolic Movement. However, most of the Free Apostolic leaders did not want to submit themselves to the authority of the Assemblies of God in the USA or to its missionaries in El Salvador, consequently they remained independent with only fraternal ties between them. Nevertheless, under the guidance of British missionary Ralph D. Williams, the initial groups of the Assemblies of God were strengthened, advances were made toward bringing church order out of chaos, and new congregations and preaching points were formed. Williams describes one of his first experiences with a local congregation as follows (Williams: n.d. p. 18):

Our greatest surprise came as we gathered for worship in another grass-roofed building about 20 by 40 feet which was framed on rustic branches with a dirt floor. Rough boards served as benches, and there were yellow, smoky lights. People were praying aloud on their knees or prostrate. Of the 40 or 50 present, none seemed concerned about order. Soon singing started, but that did not mean

music. Each seemed to sing his own tune, in his own key and time. Some even sang their own words. There were sincere and the presence of the Lord was strong. There were outbursts of tongues and praises, spontaneous testimonies, and some were praying for others.

By 1936, the Assemblies of God reported 21 churches and 14 mission stations, with 655 members and 965 adherents. However, the Assemblies of God did not receive legal recognition from the Salvadoran Government until 1950. The Rev. Francisco R. Arbizu became the first national superintendent in 1952, following in the footsteps of missionary Ralph Williams who had served in that capacity since 1930.

Based on the foundations established by early missionary and national pioneers, the Assemblies of God experienced phenomenal church growth during the next 40 years, especially between 1970 and 1990. These advances made this country a showcase for this denomination's mission work in Latin America. This solid growth is attributed to the employment of indigenous church principles during the administration of Ralph Williams and Melvin Hodges. There was a large spurt of growth between 1935 and 1945, when the total membership increased from 684 to 2,560, and then rapid geographical expansion and growth followed.

During the 1950s, a series of evangelistic campaigns were held in major cities by Stanley McPherson in 1950 and 1951; T. L. Osborn in Santa Ana in 1953; Richard Jeffery in Santa Ana, San Miguel and San Salvador in 1955-1956. All of these campaigns produced thousands of conversions and added hundreds of new church members, during a period of strong hostility and growing persecution against evangelicals by Roman Catholics.

By 1955, the membership had reached almost 6,000 where it leveled off for a few years before increasing to 9,600 in 1970. Then an explosion of growth occurred: by 1978 the membership had risen to 22,477. At that time, the Assemblies of God reported 531 churches and 1,267 mission stations and preaching points, which made it the largest Protestant denomination in the nation.

There was continued growth in the Assemblies of God during the decade of the 1980s: from 610 congregations in 1980 to 1,163 in 1990. However, during the 1990s and early 2000s, the establishment of new congregations slowed down: between 1990 and 2002 only 232 were added nationally. In 1990, the Assemblies of God reported 1,335 ordained ministers, 5,150 lay pastors, 1,163 churches and 3,763 preaching points, with a total of 105,807 members and an estimated 236,900 adherents. In 1992, there were 1,250 churches and 4,268 preaching points with 123,442 members. In 2002, 1,395 churches with an estimated 132,525 members were reported. Obviously, there was slower church growth during the 1990s than during the period 1970-1990.

In retrospect, the Assemblies of God have not been immune to schismatic movements, with several splits occurring during the 1960s and early 1970s. At least five church associations were formed by leaders who left the Assemblies of God and began their own organizations: the Pentecostal Evangelical Union (1954), the Evangelical Mission of the Holy Spirit (1960), the Garden of Eden Evangelical Church (1962), the Evangelical Mission of the Voice of God (1969, the largest of these groups), and the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of El Salvador (1974). These five associations had a total of 62 churches and 2,830 members in 1978.

The arrival of the **Church of God (Cleveland, TN)** in El Salvador in 1940 brought the Rev. H. S. Syverson, the General Overseer of the Church of God in Central America, in contact with Mebius, who agreed to work together under the auspices of the former, although there were some obvious doctrinal differences between the two church traditions. Nevertheless, Mebius worked with the Church of God for several years, until his death in 1944 at an advanced age. The

Church of God in the USA sent a number of short-term missionaries to assist Syverson in El Salvador during the 1940s and early 1950s, but it was not until 1953 that additional missionaries were assigned to the country. Growth over the next 20 years shows a consistent pattern of expansion and development in the Church of God in El Salvador. By 1970 there were 117 churches and 78 preaching points with about 4,300 members; and by 1978 the work had grown to 165 churches and 50 preaching points with 6,117 total members. In 1980, there were 191 churches and 56 preaching points with 9,557 members; by 1987 there were an estimated 300 churches and 200 preaching points with 20,122 members; and by 1992 there were 392 churches and 287 preaching points with 19,281 members. Between 1987 and 1992 there was a plateau in church membership due to unexplained causes that need to be investigated.

Additional Pentecostal denominations also began work in El Salvador in the period 1950-1980. The **Latin American Council of the Pentecostal Church of God of New York** (with 58 churches and 5,665 members in 1992) and the **Pentecostal Church of God of Puerto Rico**, both with historical ties to the Assemblies of God, arrived in 1966. The **Prince of Peace Evangelical Church** from Guatemala began work in the early 1960s: in 1987 it reported 171 churches with 5,050 members; and in 1992 there were 430 churches with 19,111 members. The **International Church of the Foursquare Gospel** sent its first missionaries to El Salvador in 1973. The **Elim Christian Mission** from Guatemala established its first congregation in El Salvador in 1977. The Assemblies of God of Brazil arrived in 1978.

The **Church of God of Prophecy** arrived in 1950, but this denomination, called the **Universal Church of God of Prophecy (UCOGP)** in El Salvador, has had several divisions: Church of God Holy Zion (1952), Fountain of Life Church of Prophecy (1969, with 74 churches and 6,727 members in 1992), the Fundamental Church of God of Prophecy (1972), the Holy Zion Church of God of Prophecy (1974), and the City of Zion Church of God of Prophecy (also in 1974). The total membership of these splinter groups was 9,871 in 1978 with 175 organized churches, whereas the parent body reported only 38 churches and four missions with 1,726 members. In 1982, the UCOGP reported 54 churches and 2,445 members; in 1992 there were 92 churches with 5,151 members.

The Oneness ("Jesus Only") Pentecostal Movement is represented in El Salvador by two denominations: the Apostolic Church of Faith in Jesus Christ (1948) and the United Pentecostal Church (1965). The former had 33 churches, 25 missions and 600 members in 1978, while the latter had 47 churches and missions, 372 preaching points, and 2,400 members.

Other non-Pentecostal denominations in El Salvador include: the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (1953), independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (1963), Church of the Nazarene (1964, with 32 churches and 2,469 members in 1992), Congregational Holiness Church (1966), Plymouth Brethren (1970, *Cristianos congregados en el nombre del Señor*, affiliated with Maurice Johnson's group in California; 45 congregations in 2007), Evangelical Mennonite Church (1968, Beachy Amish), Church of God (1970, Anderson, Indiana), Apostolic Lutheran Church of America (1974), Evangelical Lutheran Synod (1975), Christian Reformed Church (1976), and several smaller groups.

In 1978, the estimated Protestant population of El Salvador was about 295,000 or 6.5 percent of all Salvadorans. The nation's Protestant population had a large proportion of Pentecostals within the total membership (about 68 percent), compared to slightly more than 50 percent for the entire Central American region at that time. The largest Protestant denominations were the Assemblies of God (22,500 members); Seventh Day Adventists (12,000); Church of God-Cleveland, Tennessee (9,850); the Evangelical Church of El Salvador, related to the Central American Mission (6,000); and the Prince of Peace Church (5,000).

However, several new Protestant denominations in El Salvador have experienced significant growth during the past 20 or 30 years, including the following: **Elim Christian Mission of El Salvador** is a Pentecostal church founded by Sergio Daniel Solorzano Aldana in 1977, which now claims to have about 115,000 members; now led by Pastor General Mario Vega since 1997). "**Friends of Israel**" **Bible Baptist Tabernacle** was founded by "Hermano Toby," Edgar Lopez Bertrand, about 1978; it claims to have about 10,000 members and is affiliated with Baptist International Missions. "**Campground of God**" **Christian Church - Iglesia Cristiana Campamento de Dios** was founded as an independent Charismatic church by Juan Manuel Martinez in 1990; Martinez was the president of the Evangelical Alliance of El Salvador in 2006). **The International Revival Tabernacle** was founded by Carlos H. Rivas in 2001; it claims to have about 15,000 members.

Ecumenical relations between the various Protestant denominations in El Salvador have been extremely difficult due to strong doctrinal differences and leadership conflicts, mainly between Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal groups. However, the **Salvadoran Bible Society** has been the major focus of interdenominational cooperation since the 1970s because of its neutral service function of promoting the distribution and reading of the Bible among the general public. More recently, the **Latin American Confraternity of Evangelicals (CONELA)**, affiliated with the **World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF)**, has provided a platform for cooperation among conservative evangelicals since the early 1980s. In 1987, the **Salvadoran Confraternity of Evangelicals (CONESAL)** was organized and held its First Interdenominational Congress of Evangelicals at the Bible Tabernacle of the Assemblies of God in San Salvador during October 15-17. In 2001, CONESAL reported more than 50 member organizations, including denominations and service organizations.

The **Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI)**, affiliated with the World Council of Churches (WCC), has the following institutional members in El Salvador: the Baptist Association of El Salvador (affiliated with American Baptist Churches in the USA), First Baptist Church of San Salvador, Emmanuel Baptist Church in San Salvador, the Episcopal Church of El Salvador, the Calvinist Reformed Church of El Salvador (affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church in North America), and the Salvadoran Lutheran Synod (affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).

During the Salvadoran civil war, few Protestants leaders raised their voices to publicly denounce the repression by government security forces and para-military death squads. In the midst of this confusion and violence, the prophetic voice of an awakened Catholic Church was being heard, proclaiming "good news to the poor" and standing with the oppressed in their suffering, while most evangelical leaders and their congregants tried to remain neutral politically or expressed their support for the ruling government, often out of fear of retribution.

Only a few prophetic voices were raised by evangelicals to express their outrage over the systematic violation of human rights and to demand social justice for the oppressed. Three of those prophetic voices were the Rev. Roger Velásquez, senior pastor of the First Baptist Church; the Rev. Edgar Palacios, senior pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church; and Bishop Medardo E. Gómez of the Salvadoran Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod, established in 1954), all in San Salvador.

In 1985 the Salvadorian Lutheran Synod became an autonomous church. The relationship with the Missouri Synod was disrupted in 1986 because of differing views on Liberation Theology and solidarity with the oppressed, ecumenical commitment, ordination of women, etc. During the civil war in El Salvador, the Salvadoran Lutheran Synod played an outstanding role, advocating for justice and assisting displaced persons and the poor. The Lutheran Church paid a

high price for its clear prophetic stance: one of its pastors was murdered and many church workers, including the bishop, received death threats and had to go into hiding or flee the country.

The latter was also true of several Baptist pastors affiliated with the Baptist Association of El Salvador. Roger Velásquez and his family fled the country in 1978 after their lives were threatened by a rightwing death squad. Velásquez later worked for the Latin American Regional Office of World Vision International, located in San José, Costa Rica. The Palacios were forced to flee El Salvador in 1989 under the safety of U.N. troop protection. Palacios was a co-founder of the National Council of Churches in El Salvador and served as its Executive Director for three years. Edgar and his wife, Amparo López Palacios, resettled in Washington, DC, where they led the Permanent Commission of the National Debate for Peace in El Salvador. This non-governmental organization worked to stop fighting between the nation's right-wing military government and a coalition of left-wing groups under the FMLN. Both the Velásquez and Palacios families were affiliated with American Baptist Churches in the USA.

Other Religions

In addition to the rapid growth of evangelical denominations during the past few decades, El Salvador has also witnessed the emergence of numerous **non-Protestant Marginal Christian** groups, such as the **Jehovah's Witnesses** (531 congregations with 30,687 members in 2005), the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints** (Mormons, established in San Salvador in 1951; in 1965, there were 4,200 members in El Salvador; in 1986, membership was 15,100; in 1990, membership was 38,000; and in 2007, membership was reported to be 102,043 in 161 congregations), and the **Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints** (now called "Community of Christ") from the USA; the Light of the World Church from Guadalajara, Mexico; Mita Congregation, People of Amos Church and Voice of the Cornerstone from Puerto Rico; the God is Love Church and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God from Brazil; the Growing in Grace International Ministries (founded by Jose Luis de Jesus Miranda in Miami, FL), the Unity School of Christianity, and the Christadelphian Bible Mission from the USA, among others.

Also, a few **non-Christian religions** have appeared, adding to the historical presence of the Jewish community that arrived from Spain (Sephardic) during the colonial period or from other European countries, mainly in the aftermath of World War I and II. The first synagogue was founded in 1950, and the first rabbi and spiritual leader of the community was Alex Freund.

Other non-Christian religions in El Salvador include the **Bahai Faith, Islam** (mainly among Palestinian Arabs: *Comunidad Islámica Shiíta de El Salvador, Centro Cultural Islámico Fátimah Az-Zahra*), **Buddhism** (Buddhist Center of San Salvador [*Lhundrup Changchub Ling = "Jardín de la iluminación espontánea"*], Buddhist Group of San Salvador, Budismo Laica Reiyukai, Casa Tibet México-El Salvador, Kusum Ling Study Group, the International Meditation Association of the Supreme Master Ching Hai), and several **Hindu-related groups**: the Sawan Kirpal Ruhani Mission-Science of Spirituality (Sikhism/Sant Mat), Transcendental Meditation (TM), and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON, Hari Krishnas).

The **Ancient Wisdom tradition** is represented by: the Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC) has local chapters in San Salvador, Santa Ana, San Miguel and Sonsonate; Freemasonry (Grand Lodge Cuscatlán of the Republic of El Salvador); the *Instituto de Yoga y Escuela de Astrología Gran Fraternidad Universal* (GFU, founded in Venezuela by "Dr. Serge

Raynaud de la Ferrière”), and the Salvadoran Christian Gnostic Movement (founded by “Samael Aun Weor” in Mexico).

The **Psychic-Spiritualist-New Age** movement is represented by: The Theosophical Society in America (with headquarters in Wheaton, IL, was established in San Salvador in 1929), the Church of Scientology, and the UNIFICATION CHURCH OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY (Rev. Sun Myung Moon).

Some Native American religious traditions (animist) have survived from the pre-Colombian era in some areas of El Salvador. **“Popular religiosity” (syncretistic)** is practiced by a majority of the Hispanic Catholic population. Among practitioners of Amerindian religions and Hispanic Popular Catholicism there are “specialists” who practice magic, witchcraft (*brujería*), shamanism (*chamanismo*) and folk healing (*curanderismo*). In addition, there are numerous psychics, mediums, clairvoyants and astrologers who announce their services in local newspapers.

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