News

Juan Gonzalez sits next to his altar adorned Santeria and Catholic deities along with a photo of the late Cuban leader Fidel Castro, at his home in El Cobre, Cuba, Feb. 10, 2024. Diverse beliefs can be found mixed together on altars in Cuban homes, with the Virgin Mary sharing space with a ceramic Buddha and a warrior spirit from the Afro-Cuban faith. (AP/Ramon Espinosa, File)

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The 1959 Castro-led revolution installed an atheist, Communist government that sought to replace the Catholic Church as the guiding force in the lives of Cubans.

But 65 years later, religion seems omnipresent in Cuba, in dazzling diversity.

The bells toll on Catholic churches and the call to prayer summons Muslims in Havana. Buddhists chant mantras as they gather at a jazz musician's home. Jews savor rice, beans and other Cuban staples for Sabbath dinner. Santeria devotees dance and slap drums in a museum filled with statues, paying homage to their Afro-Cuban deities.

It's also visible in the growing ranks of evangelicals who worship across the island, in the faith of LGBTQ+ Christians who sing at an inclusive church in the seaport of Matanzas, or in the pilgrims who travel to the remote shrine of Cuba's patron saint in the shadow of the Sierra Maestra mountains.

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Critics say Cuba still falls short on religious tolerance. The U.S. State Department has designated Cuba a "Country of Particular Concern" for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Cuba's constitution includes provisions for religious freedom and bans religious-based discrimination. But a recent State Department report says provisions in Cuba's penal and administrative codes "contravene these protections." The report says the Cuban Communist Party requires religious groups to be officially registered, "and membership in or association with an unregistered group is a crime."

The report says the Office of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Justice continue to withhold registration to some groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Some academics and religious leaders say more strides toward full religious freedom are needed, such as easing the process to build houses of worship, allowing access

to state-owned media to spread faith-based messages, and reestablishing private religious schools. But there's been significant progress; some call it a time of Cuban religious revival.

"I don't know whether the religious revival has occurred in Cuba as a result of the (evangelical) Protestants involvement in the island, or as a result of the frustrations of the Cubans, or the result of a tolerance that the Cuban government seems to show toward religion," said Jaime Suchlicki, former director of the University of Miami Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies.

"Maybe a combination of all these factors have really revived religion in the island."

People light candles in honor of Cuba's patron saint, the Virgin of Charity of Cobre, at her shrine in El Cobre, Cuba, Feb. 11, 2024. The Vatican-recognized Virgin, venerated by Catholics and followers of Afro-Cuban Santeria traditions, is at the heart of Cuban identity. (AP/Ramon Espinosa, File)

More than 60% of Cuba's 11 million people are baptized Catholic, according to the church. Experts estimate that as many, or more, also follow Afro-Cuban traditions

such as Santeria that intermingle with Catholicism.

"Cubans are believers, but sometimes they believe in everything," said Monsignor Ramon Suarez, chancellor of Havana's Catholic archdiocese.

Cuba's religious landscape is too diverse to fit easy categorizations, said Maximiliano Trujillo, a Havana University philosophy professor.

"There's a very unique religiosity," he said. "In Cuba, it's not uncommon that someone goes to meet a babalao (Santeria high priest) in the morning and can visit a Pentecostal temple in the afternoon, and at night goes to Mass – and doesn't see any type of conflict in its spirituality."

Today, diverse beliefs can be found mixed together on altars in homes, with the Virgin Mary sharing space with a ceramic Buddha and a warrior spirit from the Afro-Cuban faith.

But when Suarez did his military service as a young seminarian, he kept his Bible hidden, fearing it would get confiscated.

"You couldn't say anything about religion," said Suarez.

Evangelicals pray during a memorial service in Havana, Cuba, May 20, 2018. The 1959 revolution led by Fidel Castro installed an atheist, Communist government, but 65 years later practitioners of diverse religions gather to pray, sing and worship across the Communist-run island. (AP/Ramon Espinosa, File)

The Catholic Church took an anti-communist stance shortly before Fidel Castro declared Cuba to be socialist in 1961. The government later accused prominent Catholics of trying to topple Castro. Public religious events were banned after processions transformed into political protests, sometimes turning violent.

Hundreds of foreign priests were expelled. Private schools, including more than 100 Catholic schools, that had operated across Cuba were nationalized.

Many Cuban priests were sent to military-run labor camps in the mid-1960s. The government became officially atheist; religion was not allowed and believers of all faiths were banned from Communist Party membership.

Church-state relations began to warm three decades later when Castro met with evangelical leaders and representatives from the local Jewish community. In 1992, the government dropped its constitutional references to atheism. The first papal visit to the island, Pope John Paul II in 1998, marked a turning point that led to government acceptance of some outdoor religious events and the celebration of Christmas outside churches for the first time in several decades.

Arguably the most popular religion in Cuba is Santeria, which fuses Catholicism with Afro-Caribbean traditions.

Santería was born as a form of quiet resistance among Cuba's Black communities. It dates back centuries to when Spanish colonists brought hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans to Cuba, many from the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria.

The Spanish tried to force Catholicism on the enslaved, but the Africans who made that transatlantic voyage brought their own religions, camouflaging them by attaching symbols of their orishas – Yoruba deities – to Catholic saints.

Santeria long remained on the political margins due to its scattered, nonhierarchical nature and centuries of taboo and racism. In recent years, it has grown in prominence.

Jewish children eat pieces of challah bread after the prayer was recited during a Shabbat service at the Beth Shalom synagogue, in Havana, Cuba Feb. 16, 2024. Jews are believed to have arrived to Cuba with Christopher Columbus in 1492, but the Cuban community officially began in the early 20th century, said the vice president of Cuba's Hebrew Community. (AP/Ramon Espinosa)

Beyond Catholicism and Santeria, Cuba has numerous smaller but vibrant faiths. Among them:

JUDAISM

At Cuba's largest synagogue, ancient Jewish traditions and Cubanness often blend. At times, Sabbath dinners at Beth Shalom include Cuban black beans and rice.

Jews are believed to have arrived in Cuba with Christopher Columbus in 1492, but the Cuban community officially began in the early 20th century, said Hella Ezkenazi, vice president of Cuba's Hebrew Community. After WWII, more European Jews arrived.

The community grew to an estimated 15,000 at its peak in the 1950s, but most emigrated to the U.S. after the 1959 revolution when many of their businesses where confiscated. Today, there are about 1,000 Jews living in Cuba.

ISLAM

The only mosque in Havana opened in 2015 and the Muslim community has grown to about 2,500 people nationwide, said Ahmed Aguero, one of the mosque's leaders.

"We're pioneers in spreading the religion here," he said. "Sometimes they have a bad impression of Muslims, they fear that we're bad or even terrorists, until they meet us and they learn about the real practice of our religion."

BUDDHISTS

Twin brothers Yasnel and Yasmel Quintana were raised in an Afro-Cuban family that follows Santeria, but they never practiced that faith. Ten years ago, they joined the local branch of Soka Gakkai, a global Japanese Buddhist organization.

On a recent Sunday, they went to the home of Cuban jazz musician Cesar Lopez and his wife, Japan-born Seiko Ishii, where group members often meet to meditate.

"Buddhism became our first and only religion, where we felt identified and grew spiritually," said Yasmel.

Soka Gakkai is present in more than 190 countries, according to the group. In Cuba, it grew from a few people in 2015 to about 500 today.