

# Religion in Chile

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Citizens of Chile most commonly identify themselves as Christian (Catholic with an estimated 63% of Chileans belonging to that church). According to a poll from 2011, 15% of the Chileans are Protestant or Evangelical and a 4% declared to have another religion. Agnostics and atheist were estimated at 18% The poll was made by Adimark and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. Most of the population of Chile is Christian.

## Contents

- 1 Demography
- 2 Legal/policy framework
- 3 Religious freedom
- 4 Catholicism
- 5 Protestantism
- 6 Latter-day Saints (Mormon)
- 7 Islam
- 8 Bahá'í Faith
- 9 Irreligion
- 10 See also
- 11 References

## Demography

According to a popular poll conducted by the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and Adimark, 63 percent of the population identify as Roman Catholic and 15 percent as surveyed declared to be Protestant. All other religions total 4 percent, and atheists and those "indifferent" regarding religion constitute approximately 25 percent.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the last census in Chile, in the year 2002, Indigenous people make up 5 percent (780,000) of the population. 65 percent of indigenous people identify themselves as Catholic, 29 percent as evangelical, and 6 percent as "other." Mapuche communities, constituting 87 percent of indigenous citizens, continue to respect traditional religious leaders (Longkos and Machis), and anecdotal information indicates a high degree of syncretism in worship and traditional healing practices.<sup>[2]</sup>

Members of the largest religious groups (Catholic, Pentecostal, and other evangelical churches) are numerous in the capital and are also found in

other regions of the country. Jewish communities are located in Santiago, Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, Valdivia, Temuco, Concepción, La Serena, and Iquique (although there is no synagogue in Iquique). Mosques are located in Santiago, Iquique, and Coquimbo.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Legal/policy framework

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.<sup>[2]</sup>

Church and state are officially separate. The 1999 law on religion prohibits religious discrimination; however, the Catholic Church enjoys a privileged status and occasionally receives preferential treatment. Government officials attend Catholic events and also major Protestant and Jewish ceremonies.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Government observes Christmas, Good Friday, the Feast of the Virgin of Carmen, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception as national holidays.<sup>[2]</sup> The government has also recently declared October 31, a public national holiday, in honor of the Protestant churches of the country.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

The law allows any religious group to apply for legal public right status (comprehensive religious nonprofit status). The Ministry of Justice may not refuse to accept a registration petition, although it may object to the petition within 90 days on the grounds that all legal prerequisites for registration have not been satisfied. The petitioner then has 60 days to address objections raised by the Ministry or challenge the Ministry in court. Once a religious entity is registered, the state cannot dissolve it by decree. The semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review; however, no organization that has registered under the 1999 law has subsequently been deregistered.<sup>[2]</sup>

In addition, the law allows religious entities to adopt a charter and by-laws suited to a religious organization rather than a private corporation. They may establish affiliates (schools, clubs, and sports organizations) without registering them as separate corporations.<sup>≠</sup>

During the period covered by this report 516 religious organizations registered under the 1999 law and gained legal public right status, bringing the total to 1,659 registered religious groups. Publicly subsidized schools are required to offer religious education twice a week through high school; participation is optional (with parental waiver). Religious instruction in public schools is almost exclusively Catholic. Teaching the creed requested by parents is mandatory; however, enforcement is sometimes lax, and religious education in faiths other than Catholicism is often provided privately through Sunday schools and at other venues. Local school administrations decide how funds are spent on religious instruction. Although the Ministry of Education has approved curriculums for 14 other denominations, 92 percent of public schools and 81 percent of private schools offered only Catholic instruction. Parents may homeschool their children or enroll them in private schools for religious reasons.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Religious freedom

According to a United States government report, the Chilean government generally respects religious freedom in practice.<sup>[2]</sup>

The 1999 law on religion grants other religions and denominations the same right that the Catholic Church possesses to have chaplains in public hospitals, prisons, and military units. Hospital regulations continue specifically to permit Catholic chaplains in hospitals, and if requested by a patient, to provide access to chaplains and lay practitioners of other religions. There were 35 Catholic chapels, 40 paid Catholic chaplains, 25 volunteer Catholic chaplains, and 1,200 religious or lay volunteers authorized to conduct Catholic religious activities in the prison system. There were approximately 9 paid evangelical Christian chaplain positions at the national level, 90 volunteer chaplains, and more than 1,200 evangelical Christian volunteers representing 82 evangelical denominations conducting religious activities in the prison system. Non-Catholic pastors reported that their access to prisons and hospitals continued to improve during 2007/2008.<sup>[2]</sup>

The celebration of a Catholic Mass frequently marks official and public events. If the event is of a military nature, all members of the participating units may be obliged to attend. Membership in the Catholic Church is considered beneficial to a military career.<sup>[2]</sup>

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Catholicism

*Main article: Roman Catholicism in Chile*

There are about eleven million Catholics - around 63% of the total population (17.200.000 in 2011). There are 5 archdioceses, 18 dioceses, 2 territorial prelatures, 1 apostolic vicariate, 1 military ordinariate and a personal prelature (Opus Dei)

Catholicism was introduced by priests with the Spanish colonialists in the 16th century. Most of the native population in the northern and central regions was evangelized by 1650. The southern area proved more difficult. In the 20th century, church expansion was impeded by a shortage of clergy and government attempts to control church administration. Relations between church and state were strained under both Salvador Allende and Augusto Pinochet.

## Protestantism

Protestants represent 15% of Chilean people. Protestants first arrived in the first half of the nineteenth century, with American missionary David Trumbull<sup>[5]</sup> and with German immigrants from Protestant parts of Germany, mainly Lutherans. Later came Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and other Protestant Christians.

First seventh-Day Adventist missionaries first arrived in 1895,<sup>[6]</sup> today there are estimated 126,814 Adventists in Chile.

## Latter-day Saints (Mormon)

*Main article: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Chile*

Early apostle Parley P. Pratt was among the first Mormon missionaries to preach in Chile, landing in Valparaíso in November, 1851, along with Elder Rufus Allen and Phoebe Sopher, one of Pratt's wives, who was pregnant at the time. The mission party was impressed by the Chilean countryside and people. Pratt wrote that the people he met in Chile were “a neat, plain, loving and sociable people; very friendly, frank, and easy to become acquainted with,” but the mission trip met with tragedy when the Pratt's month-old son died in January 1852.<sup>[7]</sup> Hampered by language difficulties and a lack of literature in the Spanish language (selections of the Book of Mormon were not translated into Spanish until 1875<sup>[8]</sup>) the missionaries left Chile after four months without having a successful baptism.<sup>[7]</sup> Pratt used his experience in South America to advise Brigham Young that the success of future missionary efforts would be based on translations of the scriptures.<sup>[9]</sup>

Missionary work in Chile began in earnest in 1956, when the country was made part of the Argentine mission and the first small branch was formed.<sup>[10]</sup> By 1961, the country had 1,100 members and the Chilean mission was organized. The following three decades saw explosive growth in church membership, with the church membership doubling every two years at its peak.<sup>[7]</sup> The growth sparked a building boom during these decades. Hundreds of LDS chapels were constructed, capped by the dedication of the Santiago Temple in 1993. Church growth continued in the 1990s, with the country having the greatest growth in LDS membership in South America during the decade. Between 1994 and 1996, 26 new stakes were dedicated in the country.<sup>[10]</sup> A second temple, in Concepción, was announced in 2009.

Although an average of 12,000 people were baptized annually between 1961 and 1990, membership growth has now cooled and the church has a large number of inactive members. According to census data, 0.9% of the population claims to be Mormon, based upon those aged 15 and over who identify themselves as Mormon. The church itself reports that it has 543,628 members in Chile, which is equal to about 3.3% of the population. If accurate, these numbers makes the LDS Church the single largest denomination in Chile after Catholicism.<sup>[11]</sup> LDS statistics counts everyone baptized, including children age eight or older as well as inactive members. Using unofficial sources, the Cumorah Project website estimates that 20% of Chilean members actively attend church services.<sup>[12]</sup> The church is now retrenching after its period of high growth and hundreds of units have been decommissioned since 1998.<sup>[12]</sup> In 2002, the church sent Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, to remain in Chile for a year to train leadership and minister to the church,<sup>[13]</sup> a role typically held by members of the quorums of the seventy.

Jorge F. Zeballos, a former mining engineer, is a Chilean-born LDS General Authority. He was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy in April, 2008.<sup>[14]</sup> Zeballos is the second Chilean to serve as a General Authority. He followed Eduardo Ayala, who served in the Second Quorum of the Seventy from 1990 to 1995.

## Islam

*Main article: Islam in Chile*

The statistics for Islam in Chile estimate a total Muslim population of 3,196, representing 0.02 percent of the population.

Islam has enjoyed a long history in Chile. According to Aurelio Díaz Meza's *Chronicles of the History of Chile*, one man in discoverer Diego de Almagro's expedition, a certain Pedro de Gasco, was a *morisco* (that is, a Moor from al-Andalus, Spain, who had been obliged to convert from Islam to Roman Catholicism). The first Islamic institution in Chile, the Muslim Union Society (*Sociedad Unión Musulmana*), was founded on September 25, 1926, at Santiago. The Society of Mutual Aid and Islamic Charity was established the following year, on October 16, 1927. Sources within the Islamic community indicate that at the moment, in Chile, there are 3,000 Muslims, many of whom are native Chileans who, as a result of their conversions, have even changed their names.

## Bahá'í Faith

*Main article: Bahá'í Faith in Chile*



The night view of a model of the new Bahá'í House of Worship soon to be constructed in Chile.

The Bahá'í Faith in Chile begins with references to Chile in Bahá'í literature as early as 1916, with the first Bahá'ís visiting the country as early as 1919. A functioning community wasn't founded in Chile until 1940 with the beginning of the arrival of coordinated pioneers from the United States finding national Chilean converts and achieved an independent national community in 1963. In 2002 this community was picked for the establishment of the first Bahá'í Temple of South America which the community is still prosecuting.<sup>[15]</sup> The US government estimated 6000 Bahá'ís in Chile as of 2007<sup>[16]</sup> though the Association of Religion Data Archives (relying mostly on the World Christian Encyclopedia) estimated some 25,000 Bahá'ís in 2005.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Irreligion

Of the Chilean population, 18% are either atheist or agnostic. .<sup>[1]</sup>

## See also

- Benei Sión
- Chilean mythology

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Categories: Religion in Chile

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