

CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENTS

What are Mexican religious beliefs and religious relationships?

The World Values Survey, which is the most comprehensive global survey of citizen values and attitudes, clearly demonstrates that Mexicans view themselves as strong believers in God. Indeed, 98 percent said they believed in God compared to 96 percent of Americans. Nine out of ten Mexicans also believe that God is important in their life and that they receive comfort and strength from religion. Regardless of their beliefs and whether or not they attend religious services, three-quarters of Mexicans described themselves as religious. This description might surprise some readers given the fact that much of Mexican political history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved conflicts between church and state, and the suppression of the Church by the Mexican government. Nevertheless, with the exception of the state of Tabasco, where local suppression of the Catholic Church and all other religions was extreme in the 1920s and 1930s, Christian beliefs are widespread throughout the country. Approximately 85 to 89 percent of the population is self-described as Catholic, followed by Protestants at 5 to 8 percent, most of whom fall into the evangelical category. A tiny percentage claims no formal beliefs or is atheist. Nearly half of all Catholics report attending church regularly, a figure typically much higher

than found elsewhere in Latin America, and three-quarters attend religious services once or more a month. Most Mexicans believe it is important to celebrate births and marriage through a religious service.

Religion, and particularly the Catholic Church, has become more influential in the last two decades, in part because of the removal of a number of religious restrictions in the Constitution in 1992. The Catholic Church views itself as providing leadership in spiritual matters, but it is willing to take public positions on other, secular issues, including human rights, democracy, economic welfare of the population, and such moral issues as drug addiction and abortion. For example, Church leaders have been critical of the negative economic consequences of the North American Free Trade Agreement on poorer Mexicans. Recently, they also have raised concerns about human rights abuses by the armed forces in carrying out the government's antidrug strategy. About a fifth of all Mexicans expect the clergy to take public positions on important public policy issues. Consequently, the clergy exercises the potential to influence public opinion. Recently half of all Mexicans say they would listen to the opinions of religious leaders when discussing politics even though two-thirds of citizens believe that such leaders should not influence government. Moreover, half of all Mexicans believe that politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for holding public office. Mexicans overwhelmingly believe their religious institutions provide them with answers to moral problems and spiritual needs.