

Fewer Latin Americans claim religion but still pray and believe

February 13, 2026

The number of Latin Americans who say they are not affiliated with a religion has long been steadily increasing.

And over the past decade, according to a 2024 Pew Research Center [survey](#), the percentage of those known as “nones” roughly doubled in Argentina (to 24 percent in 2024), Brazil (15 percent) and Chile (33 percent); tripled in Mexico (20 percent) and Peru (12 percent); and almost quadrupled in Colombia (23 percent).

But for many, that label doesn’t mean a rejection of faith. Across Brazil, Colombia, and beyond, people continue to pray, meditate, and participate in rituals drawing from Christian, Indigenous, African, and Eastern traditions in deeply personal ways, so-called nones told RNS.

Their beliefs and practices may reveal a blind spot of such surveys in how they rely on Christian and Western frameworks to define what counts as religion.

Mixed religious practice

For Camile Coutinho, a 28-year-old dietitian who lives near Rio de Janeiro, a typical week involves attending a Sunday service at a Baptist church, taking part in ritual baths and cowrie-shell divination with an Umbanda priestess, and going to Deeksha meditation gatherings.

She recites the Hail Mary and Our Father Catholic prayers and uses

Japamala prayer beads. She keeps incense and crystals in her home to attempt to cleanse negative energy. However, she identifies as religiously unaffiliated.

“I believe in the Bible, in Christianity,” she said, “but today I also believe in spiritism and in Umbanda. I’ve been studying these traditions a lot.”

Coutinho grew up in a typical Catholic Latin American religious environment. Her parents were Catholic—“though not very practicing,” she said. But when she fell ill, her mother would often take her to see a traditional folk healer who prayed over people, known in Brazil as a rezadeira.

In her teenage years, Coutinho converted to evangelical Christianity, and her family followed. In more recent years, however, she began to distance herself from her church as political polarization intensified in the country.

The church’s support for right-wing politics—especially its alignment with former President Jair Bolsonaro—along with witnessing increasingly homophobic discourse there, pushed her away, even as her parents chose to stay, she said.

Coutinho fits into a category of nones encompassing far more than only atheists or agnostics, and which is especially prevalent in Latin America.

Her experiences also echo a broader pattern in many traditional cultures, including Latin American Indigenous ones, where spiritual beliefs are inseparable from everyday life, social organization, and community practices, said Gustavo Morello, a sociologist of religion at Boston College in Massachusetts.

Less institutional spirituality

After Catholicism was introduced to Latin America by European colonizers, many regions did not have enough priests to sustain it on an institutional level. While colonial-era cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and Lima had a regular clerical presence, vast rural areas did not, and religious life was maintained by the communities, Morello said.

This opened space for practices that diverged from official Catholic orthodoxy and incorporated Afro-descendant and Indigenous spiritualities. As a result, many people came to describe their faith in personal terms, often combining multiple spiritual traditions while still identifying as Catholic.

“For the last 100 years, 9 in 10 Latin Americans believe in something,” Morello said. “The idea that you are only one religion is very North Atlantic.”

In surveys, this complexity is rarely visible. And until well into the 20th century, Morello said, one was typically either Catholic or outside the cultural mainstream altogether.

In Brazil and Colombia, more religiously unaffiliated people say they believe in God, pray daily, and consider religion very important in their lives than do those who identify as Christians in European countries such as Spain, the United Kingdom, and France, [according to Pew](#).

“Europe represents a practice grounded in doctrine, in belief and formal religious practice, whereas here [in Latin America] we have an effervescence of religious experiences that goes far beyond a purely rational adherence to religious content,” said Flavio Senra, a religious studies professor at Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais in Brazil.

That could be because the region's culture emphasizes believing in something beyond the material world, Morello said. "People in Latin America do believe in this enchanted reality—that there is a dimension in life we cannot explain with what we see only," he continued.

Both scholars said rather than thinking of the trend toward religious disaffiliation as secularization, in which religious beliefs diminish within the culture, the shift is better viewed as a change in how people approach belief.

"The idea of enchanted modernity explains better what we see in Latin America," Morello said, "because we are looking at a vibrant spiritual and religious society that does things to engage with this other world."

Freedom from commitment

At the same time, the number of atheists and agnostics is not growing in the region and remains a small percentage of the population, both scholars explained. That also suggests the growth of the nones category instead reflects weaker ties to religious institutions and greater freedom today to shop across the religious market.

"A context of greater religious, political, and cultural plurality creates an environment of greater freedom for people to express their beliefs without being judged as harshly as they were in the past," Senra said.

Juan Guevara, a 35-year-old high school philosophy teacher from Bogotá, was raised in an observant Catholic household. However, as a teenager, he began encountering other belief systems, particularly Buddhism, and started questioning his family's religion, he told RNS.

The discovery planted a lasting doubt: If there were many ways of understanding the world, why should one claim exclusive truth?

Class differences and injustice also weighed on his decision. “It started to bother me a great deal to see that the people who were particularly devout—those who professed their beliefs with special fervor—did not strike me as good people,” he said.

Guevara’s academic training in philosophy pushed him toward broader intellectual and spiritual exploration, but Buddhism remained a recurring reference point. He participated in Soto Zen and Vipassana meditation retreats and was drawn in by what he described as their internal coherence and lack of institutional demands.

“There was a lot of consistency there,” he said. “No one was asking me for a sacrament or a promise I would stay forever.”

He also took part in ceremonies involving ayahuasca, often organized by or in dialogue with Indigenous groups in Colombia. These experiences carried religious elements and were also deeply ethical, cultural, and communal, he said. But the freedom to engage without lifelong commitment was, for him, essential.

An imperfect mix

Coutinho’s experience is similar in that way. She consults with a mãe de santo priestess in the Umbanda tradition and attends rituals but deliberately avoids formal initiation. “I don’t want to go through the initiation process,” she said.

“I know that being part of Umbanda, for example, demands a much greater devotion than I’m willing to give. Even so, I feel close to the practices.”

But she described moments of confusion, too. “Sometimes I get confused trying to understand where the stories fit,” she said. “Where is Jesus in the stories of the Orixás (divine spirits)?”

Still, she continues to engage with various traditions: “I find a lot of beauty and strength in these stories, so I keep believing and studying.”

In experiencing different faith practices, this growing group of believers often gathers traces and memories, taking what they believe is good from each faith and leaving aside what does not resonate.

“The religion may not be the religiosity that Catholic leaders expect, nor the one Pentecostal pastors want,” Morello said. “But it is what the people do. It’s mixed, it’s not pure, it’s imperfect, it’s not orthodox—but it is what people are practicing.”