THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE LATIN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS MAP

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The transformation of the Latin American religious map ranks among the most significant socio-cultural processes of the 21st century. For centuries, Catholicism was not only the predominant religion, but also a structuring axis of collective identity, political legitimacy, and community life. However, recent data by the Pew Research Center show a sustained decline in Catholic affiliation in key countries such as Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, and Mexico, accompanied by the growth of evangelical churches, the rise of people with no religion, and a crisis of confidence in traditional institutions. This phenomenon should not be interpreted as the disappearance of faith, but as its transformation in a context of pluralism, social mobility, and the search for new forms of meaning.

Brazil, the country with the world's largest Catholic population for much of the 20th century, clearly illustrates this shift. The roughly 20% decline in Catholic identification reflects a shift toward evangelical and Pentecostal churches that offer strong community networks, everyday support, and practical responses to social problems. This phenomenon is linked to processes of rapid urbanization, structural inequality, and institutional fragility, in which emerging religious communities act as spaces of social support and stability. Faith, in this context, is moving from hierarchical structures to more horizontal and participatory models.

Chile represents another emblematic example, with over a 30% decrease in its Catholic population since the 1990s. We cannot fully examine Chilean secularization without also considering the crisis of legitimacy that has affected the Church, as well as the increasing number of people who declare themselves without religion. Institutional disaffection does not necessarily imply atheism; rather, it expresses a critical distance from structures perceived as inconsistent with contemporary values such as transparency, gender equality, and human rights. This phenomenon reveals a profound cultural transformation: moral authority is no longer automatically granted to religious institutions but is judged by their ethical consistency.

Uruguay, for its part, constitutes a unique case of historical secularism. Although its secularization process is less advanced than in other countries, its inclusion among the contexts of greatest decline in Catholicism highlights the consolidation of a society in which religion occupies a more private than public role. The high percentage of people with no religious affiliation does not imply an absence of values, but rather the construction of ethical frameworks based on civic and humanistic principles. This model demonstrates that social cohesion can be sustained through secular consensus oriented toward the common good.

Argentina shows a significant drop in Catholicism, although it remains the majority religion. The increase in the number of people with no religious affiliation and the growing spiritual diversification reflect a changing society, where religious identity is no

longer inherited but a personal choice. The pluralization of Argentina's religious landscape not only implies competition among different faiths but also the emergence of individual spiritualities that blend elements of different traditions. This phenomenon evidences a shift in how we believe: faith becomes more reflective, less institutional, and more closely linked to personal experience.

Mexico, historically one of the world's most Catholic countries, is also witnessing a notable decline in its number of faithful. Evangelical expansion and religious pluralization indicate that Catholic hegemony has weakened, yielding to a diverse religious marketplace. This shift occurs in a context of profound social transformation, in which internal migration, urbanization, and inequality have reshaped community structures. Evangelical churches, by offering immediate support networks, have managed to attract people seeking belonging and tangible support.

Taken together, these countries reveal three structural trends. First, evangelical growth as the main factor of religious substitution: these churches have been able to adapt to urban and vulnerable contexts, providing social capital and a sense of belonging. Second, the increase in people with no religion, especially in the Southern Cone, indicates a deinstitutionalization of faith rather than its disappearance. Third, the crisis of institutional confidence has weakened the moral authority of the Catholic Church, forcing it to rethink its role in increasingly critical and pluralistic societies.

Paradoxically, this regional process contrasts with the upturn of Catholicism in the United States, driven by Latin American immigration. Immigrant communities reshape the American religious landscape through devotional practices, festivities, and solidarity networks that revitalize parishes and reinforce cultural identities. Faith, in this context, functions as a resource of integration and symbolic continuity. This contrast shows that religion does not disappear but transforms in response to social and cultural conditions.

The central question that arises from this panorama is not whether faith is in decline, but what forms faith takes and its social function in increasingly diverse societies. The decline in Catholic affiliation does not necessarily imply an ethical vacuum. On the contrary, many social sectors seek frameworks of meaning oriented towards social justice, human dignity, and solidarity. Faith, understood as active trust in the possibility of building a better world, can be manifested in both religious traditions and secular humanisms.

In this scenario, the International Academy faces a historic responsibility. Universities and research centers have the capacity to rigorously analyze these changes, avoiding simplistic interpretations that equate secularization with the loss of values. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the Academy can demonstrate that religious transformation unlocks opportunities to build inclusive public ethics that reflect the common good. This role involves fostering dialogue between religious traditions, civil organizations, and state actors, promoting collaborative solutions to urgent social problems.

Faith, in its broadest sense, can become an engine of actions that pursue the common good. Experiences in different countries show that religious communities and secular organizations collaborate in humanitarian assistance programs, community education, and conflict mediation. These initiatives demonstrate that spirituality can be translated into concrete practices of solidarity. The International Academy can document these experiences, assess their impact, and disseminate replicable models that strengthen the social fabric.

Inviting others to lead by example in this context implies recognizing that moral credibility no longer depends on institutional belonging, but on the coherence between principles and actions. Religious transformation in Latin America should not be seen as a terminal crisis, but as an opportunity to renew commitment to human dignity and social justice. Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, and Mexico show that faith is in

transition, not disappearing. The International Academy, by accompanying this process, can help ensure that spirituality – in its many expressions – inspires new forms of solidarity, responsibility, and active hope in a world marked by uncertainty.

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