

CUBA

When many think of Cuba, they likely picture colorful Spanish colonial architecture, streets full of music and food, and classic old cars driving around. This image, however, is mostly false apart from the capital, due to severe human rights and religious freedom limitations on the island. The average Cuban cannot practice their faith without fear of oppression.



Cuba's constitution states that it "recognizes, respects, and guarantees religious liberty," but such declarations do not tell the whole story. Though Cuba separates church from state, its government oversees all religious life, viewing the free practice of faith as a threat to the Cuban Communist Party's grip on power. This has led to various forms of repression, mainly carried out by the Cuban government's Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), which in recent years has become increasingly hostile towards people of faith.

Of the 11 million people on the island, an estimated 60% identify as Catholic and 5% as Protestant, including Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and Seventh Day Adventists. There are also small Jewish communities (mainly in the capital), Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, and Muslim and Baha'i communities. Many also hold syncretic beliefs and spiritual practices.

The ORA enlists the entire government to regulate all religious activities in the country through intimidation and surveillance. The government requires registration for churches to operate legally but rarely approves applications. If unregistered, any activity by a religious group—including worship, gatherings, and house churches—is deemed illegal.

Religious leaders often face harassment and interrogation about stances on government policies. If uncooperative, authorities threaten leaders with fines or church closings. In a troubling trend, the government has also begun pressuring religious leaders into exile through physical and mental abuse. Observers believe that around 300,000 Cubans have left the island since July 2021, some of whom are religious leaders forced to flee. Baptist Pastor Mario Félix Leonart Barroso, for example, detained 21 times from 2011-2013 and treated violently by officials, fled Cuba with his family in August 2016 after threats on his life and his congregation. In the ensuing years, other pastors experienced similar treatment.

Notably, Christians are not the only ones facing religious freedom problems in Cuba. Widely observed Afro-Cuban religious and spiritual practices confront similar regulations and threats, such as the syncretic Yoruba religion, often referred to by outsiders as Santería, "Way of the Saints." Based on the traditions of the Yoruba people originally from West Africa, practitioners account for an estimated 70% of the population since it incorporates elements of Catholicism with its traditions. However, the Catholic Church does not recognize this mix. Followers of Santería make physical offerings to saints or deities, known as orishas. However, much like Cuban Christian churches, unregistered Santería communities (and in particular, the Free Yorubas) are frequently harassed and threatened with criminal sanctions, their members' ability to worship freely in meeting houses restricted, and government officials often attempt to co-opt the faith for political purposes.



Given the religious diversity on such a small island and a government that instills fear in nearly all faith communities there, what are some ways you can pray for people of faith in Cuba?

MARCH SCRIPTURE

James 1:2-5; 12 (NIV)

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, **3** because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. **4** Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. **5** If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

PRAYER

Father in Heaven, we praise You because You are a God who is before all things, having made all things for Your glory, every person, and in You, all things hold together. We praise You because despite worldly, evil attacks against faith and one's conscience, You care deeply for Cuba, for those from all faith backgrounds. For those in Christ, You are present and powerfully in their midst. We ask Your Holy Spirit now to give them even greater strength to continue fighting the good fight, protect them from the hands of the enemy and the state, and increase their peace over fear as they trust in Your name. For those followers of different faiths on the island, Lord, we know that You cherish their lives because they are Your creation, made in Your image. We ask you to place your hand of protection and comfort over their lives, providing them with hope.

Lord, increase our empathy, our understanding, our concern. Expand our hearts to remember Cuba each day this month, to faithfully cry out on behalf of our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ unable to freely worship or gather without fear of harassment. Help us to also pray earnestly for fearful Yoruba families who confront discrimination or whose sacred sites are vandalized or attacked. Though we want them to ultimately know You and Your love fully, we also know You are a God of justice who does not turn his face from suffering. Therefore, do not let us therefore turn our hearts and minds away from their pain. We trust You, and we love you, Lord.

We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

