

# Religion

Latvia is a multidenominational Christian nation.

Lutherans are its largest community, followed by 25%-35%. It predominates in the Western and Central Latvia.

*The history of Christianity in Latvia begins at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century when Meinhart, an Augustinian priest, came from Germany to convert the people in Latvia to the Christian faith. In 1186 Meinhart became Latvia's first bishop, establishing his church at Ikskile. The church in Latvia was from early on influenced by the Reformation.*

*The first Lutheran congregation was established in Riga in 1523 and Martin Luther himself addressed a letter to it. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the church in Latvia was influenced by the pietism of the brotherhoods of the Herrnhuter movement of Conrad Zinzendorf and through their work Christian faith and literature played a large role in the life and education of the people.*

*The institutional development and integrity that largely characterized the years between 1918 and 1940 were severely disrupted by the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent religious persecution under communist rule. As the Russian army approached Latvia in 1944, Archbishop Teodors Grīnbergs and approximately sixty percent of Lutheran clergy went into exile. Kārlis Irbe was elected to lead the church. Initially Irbe and others believed that cooperation with the new Soviet government would allow the church to retain some independence.*

*In addition in 1954 the Soviet regime forced changes in the Constitution of the church, adopted in 1928, forced the suspension of Teodors Grīnbergs and oversaw the election of a new archbishop. These measures were ratified by decisions of a Synod that elected Gustavs Tūrs as Archbishop. In turn he was succeeded by Pēteris Kleperis and Alberts Freijws, both of whom, however, died shortly after their election and were never consecrated. From 1969 until 1983 the ELCL was led by Jānis Matulis.*

*Today the membership of the ELCL numbers approximately 580,000 persons. The ELCL has 297 congregations, and in 2007 the ELCL numbered 136 ordained*

*pastors and around 70 evangelists.*

Catholicism is the faith of 20%-25% of Latvia's inhabitants and the prime religion of Latgale (Eastern Latvia).

*Christianity in Latvia spread at the end of the 12th century when Augustinian monk Meinhard of Segeberg started preaching the Gospel to the Baltic tribes. In 1185 the first stone church was built in Ikskile. In 1186 Meinhard was consecrated as bishop of Ikskile and remained in his position until his death in 1196. In the 14th century his relics were reburied in Riga Cathedral. Saint Meinhard is the first Latvian apostle and saint (since 8 September, 1993).*

*With the spread of Christianity in the current territory of Latvia, bishop Meinhard devoted his mission work to Virgin Mary. During the Lateran Council IV in 1215 pope Innocent III gave Livonia the title of "Terra Mariana" (Land of Mary) promising to care for it as for the Land of His Son - Palestine.*

*Latvia used to be nearly all-Catholic in late Medieval era when crusading German knights converted it from paganism. Catholicism lost ground after the same German nobility adopted Lutheranism in 16th century (and Latvian peasants followed suit). In Latgale however Catholic Poles and Lithuanians had a direct rule in 16th-18th centuries, funding lavish Baroque churches such as Aglona and helping Catholicism to retain majority.*

*Roman Catholic church managed to survive the Soviet persecutions better than Lutherans due to its more religious nature and foreign support. The share of Catholics remained constant at ~25%. Therefore, while Lutheran adherents outnumbered Roman Catholics by 2-to-1 in 1935, today their congregations are similar in size according to many statistics.*

*The holiest place of Latvia's Catholics is Aglona and its Basilica of the Assumption where a massive religious festival takes place every 15th of August. The sacred painting of Virgin Mary is venerated there.*



## *Aglona Basilica*

*(source:*

*<http://www.photoriga.com/2011/05/out-of-riga-sunday-aglona-basilica.html>)*

Russian Orthodox faith (18%-22%) is mostly followed by Russophone Soviet settlers and their descendants.

*The history of the Russian people is allied to the history of the Orthodox Church. The first records of the Orthodox religion in Latvia date back to the tenth century. The famous route 'from the Varangians to the Greeks' ran along the Daugava river (the Western Dvina). This was not only a trade route but a road that spread of Christianity. In the eastern regions of present day Latvia Christianity came from the neighbouring lands of Ancient Rus: from Polotsk, Pskov and Novgorod. Data from archaeological excavations as well as written sources bear witness to the presence of Orthodox Christianity on the territory of Latvia before the invasion of the crusaders. There are no historical facts to prove that the spread of the Orthodox faith was violent in character during those times.*

*The subjugation of the Latvian territories by the crusaders in the 13th century led to the imposition of Catholicism on the local population and the destruction of*

*Orthodox churches.*

*After the Soviet occupation in 1941 the Moscow Patriarchate decided to eliminate the autonomy of the Latvian Orthodox Church. During World War II the German forces supported orthodoxy in occupied territories in Latvia and Russia, in order to turn people against Soviet rule. In time period between 1944 and 1970 the Soviet authorities closed down 60 Orthodox parishes and many priests were repressed. After restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia the Latvian Orthodox Church was again able to decide on its jurisdiction and further development. In December 1992 the All-Latvia Orthodox Conciliar Meeting came together and decided to maintain autonomy under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. In 2010 the All-Latvia Conciliar Meeting elected the Synod and adopted the statutes of the Church. In 2010 the Latvian Orthodox Church included 121 parishes, 88 priests and about 370,000 Orthodox believers. It is possible that the actual number of Orthodox believers has been exaggerated. Most worship take place in Russian, but there are about 30 Latvian congregations. There are two Orthodox women's monasteries and one men's monastery in Latvia*

Old Believers (schismatic Orthodoxes who came as refugees to Latgale ~17th century) have ~1,7% as their followers.

*Old Believers are the Latvia's 4th strongest faith, but with 1,7% as its adherents it falls far behind in numbers beyond the first three. It is followed by ethnic Russian communities whose forefathers arrived to Latgale fleeing persecution in Russia.*

*Traditional Old Believer churches are small and wooden, located in their own isolated villages. As the centuries passed, many Old Believers moved into cities, with one of the largest Old Believer churches in the world now operating in Riga.*

There are many smaller, mainly protestant Christian denominations that are all together followed by 1,5%-2,5% of Latvia's population.

Largest non-Christian faiths are neo-Pagan Dievturi, Jewish and Muslim (in that order) but they are each followed by just 0,01%-0,05% of total population.

*Dievturība is the a Latvian faith that claims to have reconstructed a pre-Christian pagan faith of Latvia. It is the largest non-Christian faith of Latvia with some ~700 followers who are known as Dievturis (~0,035% of total).*

*Like other pagans Dievturis rely on tradition rather than scriptures As Latvian paganism was replaced by Christianity in 12th-13th centuries there remained no direct continuation of tradition, meaning that much of what exists now has been reconstructed.*

*Dievturība was established in 1925 as the newly independent Latvian nation sought to (re)discover its Latvian cultural roots to replace the ones imposed by the centuries of foreign rule. As Christianity was imposed by German conquerors this meant that it had to go as well. However, only a small minority of patriotic Latvians interested in history actually converted to Dievturība and the process never had a state support. Still, the faith continues to grow after independence.*

*Dievturis believe in a multitude of gods and goddesses, each of them associated with various natural forces and aspects of life. The top trinity are Dievs (primary god after whom the faith itself is named), Māra ("Mother Earth", female counterpart of Dievs) and Laima (goddess of fertility).*

Under the Soviet occupation, atheism was promoted by the state, while the religious were discriminated. This hit some communities more than others, with the Lutheran, Old Believers and Jewish share declining the most. In total, ~18% of Latvia's population is now irreligious.

Note that the Latvian cense do not record religion and the official statistics are based on self-reporting by religious organizations, which may use different systems to record the numbers of their followers. As such the percentages may have a big margin of error and vary among sources.