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A group of Brazilian tourists hold hands standing in a circle at the heart of a stone labyrinth in the Pueblo Encanto spiritual theme park in Capilla del Monte, Argentina, July 19. (AP/Natacha Pisarenko)

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Capilla Del Monte, Argentina â?? October 12, 2023

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In the pope's homeland, there's a woman who believes in angels and calls them aliens. Another proudly identifies as a witch. And there's a spiritual guru so turned off by the Vatican's opulence that he left the church to help others connect spiritually outside organized religion.

All three are former Catholics who have joined many other Argentines in the growing ranks of the religiously unaffiliated. Known as the "nones," they identify as atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious, or simply, nothing in particular.

Pablo Robles says a better label for him would be "all," since he has a rich spiritual life outside religion.

Robles grew up Catholic but became disenchanted while visiting the Vatican during the Great Jubilee of 2000. At a papal Mass, he listened to a sermon on humility â?? and found himself questioning how the church's vast wealth conflicted with that message.

"I was next to a gold column larger than my apartment," Robles said. "It just unsettled me so much that I said: 'This is not the truth. They're speaking about one thing and doing another.' "



Brazilians Gilma Ribeiro, center, and Neiva Santos, second left, hold hands standing in a circle at the heart of a stone labyrinth in the Pueblo Encanto spiritual theme park in Capilla del Monte, Argentina, July 19. (AP/Natacha Pisarenko)

Back in Argentina, he began searching for answers in astrology, Buddhism and Sufism, the mystical side of Islam. He now uses music, yoga and reiki to help others connect spiritually.

"This is growing because it's a moment where the structures and the institutions no longer show coherence and people need freedom instead of the public approval of an institution," he said after meditating at a Zen Buddhist temple in Brazil, where he teaches meditation and yoga.

Most Latin Americans are Christian, and Catholicism remains the dominant religion; about two-thirds of Argentina's 45 million people identify as Catholic. But the church's influence has waned. There's discontent following clergy sex abuse scandals and opposition to the church's stances against abortion and LGBTQ rights.

More Argentines now seek spiritual answers beyond the church — in yoga, tarot, astrology and beliefs outside religion.

"The growth of those without a religion or belonging in the pope's country is very striking," said Hugo Rabbia, a political psychology professor at the National University of Cordoba.

He said the percentage of people who don't identify with a religion in Argentina doubled within the last 15 years. That's similar to the United States and some other nations.

"It coincides with a series of public debates on sexual and reproductive rights that have strongly influenced the position of some people regarding traditional religions," Rabbia said.

Msgr. Sergio Buenanueva, a bishop in Argentina's Cordoba province, said the church must be less judgmental and more tolerant to reach the nones, especially young people, and bring them back.

"We must be there where the young are," he said. "It's a ministry of presence, of closeness, of support. Not approaching them with an attitude of judges who come to judge the moral behavior."

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Disenchantment with the church has led some to formally quit Catholicism, including Lin Pao Rafetta. He is part of the Argentine Coalition for a Secular State that is leading an apostasy movement.

"I started to have a series of reasons to abandon the institution," said Rafetta, who was fired from a Jesuit university as an art history professor after renouncing the faith in a "Collective Apostasy." Other Argentines signed renunciations as well.

Rabbia said many in the growing ranks of nones retain some of the beliefs without being part of the church.

"There's an increasingly significant group of people linked to new spiritualities," he added.

That is evident in Argentina's spiritual hub, Capilla del Monte. The town in Cordoba province, about 500 miles (800 kilometers) northwest of Buenos Aires, is reputed to attract powerful energy, and some say, even extraterrestrial activity.

A group gathered recently at a plateau overlooking Uritorco hill, where some believe an alien city is buried. Passing around condor feathers, Fabian Kloss danced around a bonfire to the bang of drums before meditating inside a pyramid.

"Seven years ago, I started this spiritual journey when I came to Capilla searching for UFOs," said Kloss, who attended a Catholic school but left the religion to pursue a spiritual path. "I've felt so much peace, love and goodness here, and I realized that I wasn't searching for UFOs, but for meaning in life."

Similar searches attract spiritual tourists from afar. Neiva Santos, an architect from Brazil, distanced herself from Catholicism in her 30s.

She recently led a retreat to Capilla del Monte with Brazilians who woke at dawn to meditate in a white-rock labyrinth.

"Religion was always something that didn't allow me to be who I really am; it was always controlling, always about sins, always about the guilt regarding some of the best things in life," Santos said.

"You pray: 'Holy Father, who art in heaven.' And he's not there. He's inside, right here," she said, pointing to her heart.

Respecting all people and their beliefs is crucial, said Santos. "My religion is me and my divinity is here inside of me."

A spiritual quest brought Daniel Brower from Texas to settle here more than two decades ago. Dream catchers and Tibetan Buddhist flags left behind by visitors decorate his home; a multilingual sign reads: "May peace prevail on Earth." Brower's siblings still attend his former Dallas church. He has focused instead on spirituality through sound healing.

"Spirituality is the reason we're here" said the self-described hippie with a long white beard. "To remember who we are; that we're part of the universe."



Daniel Brower plays crystal bowls at his home in Capilla del Monte, Cordoba, Argentina, July 18. Brower renounced his Christian upbringing and now looks for his spirituality through music and nature. (AP/Natacha Pisarenko)

A few miles away, along a dirt road, is Miryam Dietrich's home, overlooking a grassy patch where some believe a spaceship landed. Dietrich says she has had several encounters with beings from a subterranean city thought to be nearby.

"What different religions call angels are these more advanced civilizations, some intraterrestrial, others extraterrestrial," said Dietrich, an attorney who grew up in a conservative Catholic family. "Some are from this solar system â?| preventing Earth from being destroyed."

She also accepts ancestral Indigenous knowledge that sees God or a divine power manifesting in nature.

"God is the wind, the trees, the animals," she said. "He's everywhere."

Ana Ottobre, 27, grew up singing in a Catholic choir on Saturdays and attending Mass on Sundays. But she felt constricted: "I wanted to get a tattoo and my grandma would say: 'That's from the devil. Your body is sacred. God wouldn't approve.'"

At 18, she decided against confirmation. She became a tattoo artist, and now proudly identifies as a none and a witch; she has leg tattoos of a sorceress and a black cat.

"This whole holistic world is made up of beautiful people who are looking for their personal evolution," she said. "There's this thing about wanting to improve and help other people on their spiritual path."

Argentina shares many historical and cultural similarities with its neighbor, Uruguay. Their capitals, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, are on the shores of the River Plate where the tango was born in the 19th century. Both nations cherish gaucho or cowboy culture; some people worship soccer as a quasi-religion. But religiosity is markedly different across the river.

"It's surprising that people attribute everything to God," said Fabian Alvarez a sanitation worker and atheist, as he fished on the Uruguayan side. "It's surprising that in a soccer game, someone would ask God to save a penalty shot."

In Uruguay, home to 3.3 million people, more than half identify as religiously unaffiliated — the highest portion in Latin America.

"It's incredible for anyone who sees it from outside, but for us, it's a given," said Valentina Pereira, a professor at Uruguay's Catholic University.

"Religion doesn't visibly hold an important place in Uruguayan society."

Uruguay has a long history of secularization. In the early 20th century, the country banned any mention of God in oaths of office and removed crucifixes from public hospitals, Pereira said. Then holidays were secularized. While Holy Week is the most sacred time of the year for many worldwide, in Uruguay, it's known as Tourism Week. Christmas? It's Family Day.

"Secularism is sacred for Uruguayans," she said.

Juan Bucio, a Catholic working at a Montevideo bookstore, said he feels alone. His coworkers are all nones, but he still keeps a holy card of St. Maria Francesca Rubatto

â?? an Italian nun and Uruguay's first saint. "It's a tough place to practice religion."



Monica Marracino dances in a spiritual ceremony near the Uritorco hill in Capilla del Monte, Cordoba, Argentina, July 18. (AP/Natacha Pisarenko)

A few blocks away, the Rev. Bernardo Techera greeted the few parishioners who entered the cathedral for Mass.

"In Uruguay, the priest doesn't have any prestige," Techera said. The upside, he said, is that those who are religious are deeply committed. "You truly live this religion. It's a personal decision, not a social imposition."

Juan Castelli, a software engineer from Montevideo, recalled reading the Bible and praying until age 15 when he stopped believing in God.

"I don't know anyone who goes to church," said Castelli, a former Catholic. He acknowledged that some churches help those struggling with poverty and addiction. But religions, he said, can be harmful, especially when mixed with politics.

Not far from Montevideo lives Uruguay's best-known atheist: former President Jose Mujica. Now, 88, Mujica gained respect globally and across the political spectrum for his simple ways. The former guerrilla leader and Nobel Peace Prize nominee donated most of his salary to charity and declined to live in the presidential palace.

Interviewed at his flower farm, he reflected on the global rise of the religiously unaffiliated.

"I see all religions as very arrogant because the universe's magnitude is so brutal, and yet they try to place humans as the epicenter." Mujica said. "Since we don't want to die, we need to build something that creates the illusion that not everything ends here. I believe we come from nothing. Heaven, and also hell, is right here."