

LATIN AMERICAN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROGRAM -
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**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
RELIGION IN THE BAHAMAS**

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Religion in the Bahamas

Country Summary

The Bahamas, an archipelago that stretches from near the southeastern coast of Florida to the Turks and Caicos in the Caribbean Sea, consists of 700 islands and cays, many quite small. However, the total land area is 5,380 square miles. The islands are coral formations and the highest point on any of them is only 400 feet above sea level. The Bahamians enjoy a semi-tropical climate and have only two seasons. Winter extends from December through April and summer from May through November. Trade winds temper the effects of high humidity. The islands are vulnerable to hurricanes between June and November. The country has an area of 13,939 square miles (land and maritime).

The nation's population in 2009 was estimated at 340,000, including those residing illegally, and its citizens comprise an independent state within the British Commonwealth of Nations. The country is ethnically diverse and includes a Haitian minority of legal and illegal immigrants estimated at 40,000 to 60,000 persons and a white/European minority that is nearly as large. The ethnic composition of the Bahamas today is 85 percent black, 12 percent white, and 3 percent Asian and Hispanic (2000 census).

Christopher Columbus' first sight of land on his historic 1492 voyage to the New World was San Salvador Island in the Bahamas, which were originally the home of the Awarak Amerindian people. Unfortunately, this first contact with Europeans proved disastrous, and the Arawak were soon obliterated by a combination of warfare and diseases to which they had no immunity during attempts by Spanish forces to enslave them.

The Spanish did not colonize the Bahamas, as they were looking for lands rich in gold and none was found there. However, the Bahamas were later colonized by British privateers, who preyed on Spanish ships that were loaded with gold from its American colonies and preparing to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

England first staked a claim on the Bahamas in the form of a land grant in 1578. However, no attempt was made to colonize the islands until they were granted to Sir Robert Heath in 1629. The first settlement was on Santa Catalina Island, now called New Providence, in 1630. Other settlers came in gradually, among them the Puritan Eleuteran Adventurers who settled on New Providence in 1647, which was used by many buccaneers as a base of operations. The buccaneers of many nationalities so harassed Spanish shipping that the Spanish raided Santa Catalina Island in 1641, and retained possession until 1666 when the English regained control. In 1717, the Bahamas became a British Crown Colony. The buccaneers were brought under control by the first British governor, Captain Woodes Rogers, a former pirate himself.

In the 1640s, the British began serious settlement in the Bahamas and developed a plantation culture, which required more laborers. To fill that need, the British imported African slaves, whose descendents constitute the majority of the population today. Slavery was abolished in the British-controlled Caribbean in 1838.



The economy was based principally on fishing and salvaging the remains of the numerous shipwrecks that occurred in the shallow Bahamian waters. Poor soil brought failures to any large-scale plantation operation. The Bahamas had periods of prosperity as a center of Confederate blockades during the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), and as a base for U.S. Prohibition-era rum-runners (1920-1933).

Since World War II, the Bahamas have become an attractive tourist resort area, with tourism becoming the mainstay of the economy. U.S. citizens account for over 75 percent of all foreign visitors. Banking and finance constitute the economy's second most important sector. The Bahamas' status as a tax haven and its system of banking regulations have led to its growth as an international banking center. The Bahamas have become an important transshipment point for oil going to North America. Other industries include pharmaceuticals, cement, rum and liquor distilleries (mainly rum made from sugarcane).

The Bahamas became independent from Great Britain on 10 July 1973, but have remained part of the British Commonwealth of Nations. The head of state is Queen Elizabeth II, who is represented by a Governor-General whom she appoints. The current Head of Government is Prime Minister Hubert Alexander Ingraham (2007). Legislative powers are vested in the Parliament, consisting of an elected 38-member House of Assembly and an appointed 16-member Senate. The Progressive Labor Party controls the politically-stable Bahamian government.

Overview of Religious Development

For the first two hundred years of British dominance of the Bahamas, the **Church of England** was the only organized religious group. Its hegemony was not disturbed until the arrival of the Methodists in 1786. During the 19th and 20th centuries, however, it lost substantial ground, as more and more religious groups, primarily from the U.S., established congregations. Today, the Anglican Diocese of the Bahamas is part of the **Anglican Province of the West Indies**, whose archbishop currently resides in Nassau. Today, there are more than 41,000 adherents and 100 churches served by 40 priests in the Anglican Diocese of Nassau and the Bahamas.

According to the 2000 census, the religious affiliation of the Bahamian population was: Baptist 35.4 percent, Anglican 15.1 percent; Roman Catholic 13.5 percent; Pentecostal 8.1 percent; Church of God 4.8 percent (no differentiation was made between the various Church of God organizations); Methodist 4.2 percent; other Christian 15.2 percent; none or unspecified 2.9 percent; and other 0.8 percent.

The first recorded Protestant worship service in the Bahamas was conducted by the Eleutheran Adventurers, who were Puritan separatists from the Church of England and came seeking freedom of worship. They landed on a Bahamian island in 1648, which they named Eleuthera; they initially conducted worship services in a cave, presumably building a chapel later. An Anglican chapel was built in Nassau in 1724, and the Anglican Church was the Established Church in the Bahamas between 1734 and 1869. The Wesleyan Methodist Church was established by Freeman in 1786, and effective Methodist missionary work was begun in 1800. No permanent Roman Catholic work was started until 1866.

Wesleyan (British) Methodists expanded into the Caribbean after the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), when Methodists in the USA became independent of British Methodism. As with the Anglican Church, the Methodist constituency in the Caribbean was strengthened by British Loyalists who left the former British colonies in North America and settled in the Bahamas.

The same was true of some Scottish Presbyterian Loyalists who settled in the Bahamas in 1783. They formed the St. Andrew's Society in 1798, and began the construction of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Nassau in 1810. Close ties with the State were severed through an Act of Parliament in 1869. Several additional Presbyterian congregations were established in the Bahamas in Freeport (1966) and Marsh Harbour, Abaco (1995). The Presbyterian churches in the Bahamas are affiliated with the Church of Scotland.

Joseph Paul, a former slave from the Carolinas who arrived in the Bahamas in 1786, is considered one of the founders of Methodism in the Bahamas. In 1800, the Rev. William Turton of Barbados came as the first Methodist minister. The Bahamas came under the jurisdiction of the British Methodist Church through the **Methodist Missionary Society**, which sent its first missionary to the Bahamas in 1848. The Methodist community in the Bahamas received a new injection of energy in 1877 with the arrival of missionaries from the **African Methodist Episcopal Church**, a predominantly black U.S. denomination. In 1968, the Bahamian Methodists joined the **Conference of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas**. In 1973, this denomination reported over 3,300 members and an estimated community of 7,400 in the Bahamas.

Among the 20th century arrivals were missionaries representing the Baptists with ties to the **British Baptist Union**, who are now organized as the **Bahamas National Baptist Missionary and Education Convention**. Baptist work started in 1780 with the preaching of Frank Spence, a former slave. In 1790, a group of free slaves, including one Prince Williams, arrived in an open boat from St. Augustine, Florida, and started preaching among the Bahamians. He built a small chapel and started what is known as Bethel Baptist Church in 1801; Sambo Scriven was its first pastor and Prince Williams was his assistant. In 1833, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Burton arrived as missionaries of the Baptist Missionary Society based in London. The Burtons founded almost one hundred churches in the islands. The **Bahamas National Baptist Missionary and Education Convention** is reported to be the largest religious community in the islands, with an estimated constituency of 51,900 among 330 churches in 2005, which surpassed the Anglican community of an estimated 29,900 adherents in 2005. Today, there are at least eight Baptist associations and several independent Baptist churches in the Bahamas.

Probably the first Baptist in The Bahamas was Frank Spence, who arrived in 1780 as a slave with the British Loyalists who left the USA. Spence began preaching and eventually built a chapel in Nassau. The Bahamas National Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention with 55,000 members in over 200 churches is the largest denominational body in the country.

Source: <http://www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/hst-carb.htm>

The Roman Catholic Church began its ministry in the Bahamas in 1866, but it was not until 1960 that the first diocese was organized. The Prefecture Apostolic of Bahama was established in 1929, under the Archdiocese of New York; and the Vicariate Apostolic of Bahama Islands was created in 1941. The Diocese of Nassau was established in 1960 under the Archdiocese of Kingston in Jamaica. The *1980 Catholic Almanac* reported 26,340 Catholics (about 12 percent of the population) in the Bahamas. This figure is considerably less than the statistics reported in 1968: 34,000 Catholics (28 percent of the population)

In 2002, the Archdiocese of Nassau (established in 1999) reported that 15.4 percent of the Bahamian population was Roman Catholic (adherents). Patrick Christopher Pinder was named its archbishop in 2004, at which time the archdiocese reported 30 parishes served by 29 priests (15 diocesan and 14 religious priests). Also, there were 14 male religious and 28 female religious

workers, along with 13 permanent deacons. This archdiocese has two suffragan dioceses: Hamilton in Bermuda (1967) and Turks and Caicos (1984).

Today, more than twenty Protestant denominations operate in the Bahamas, most affiliated with U.S.-based church bodies. Although many unaffiliated Protestant congregations are almost exclusively black, most mainstream churches are integrated racially.

The **Seventh-day Adventist Church** first arrived in the Bahamas in 1909 and developed a strong following. This denomination had an estimated 21,700 adherents in 2005. Also, present are the following Free Church denominations: Baptist International Missions (6,130 adherents in 2005), the Church of God (Anderson, IN – about 10,000 adherents in 2005), the Christian Brethren (known as Open Brethren), Exclusive Brethren, Christian Churches / Churches of Christ, the Evangelical Church in the West Indies (founded by West Indies Mission, now WorldTeam), the Presbyterian Church, the Salvation Army and other small groups.

The Church of the Nazarene

In 1950, Rosalyn Henfield went from The Bahamas as a new convert to an independent Bible School in Haiti. While there she met and married Massillon Pierre. This young couple began to pastor one of the independent churches associated with the Bible College. These years also saw the Henfields joining the Nazarene church. The Nazarene church they were pastoring was one of the largest Nazarene Churches in the capital of Haiti. However, in the late 1960s Rosalyn's mother in Nassau, Bahamas, became ill. Rosalyn went to be with her. In a short time, her husband had moved to be with them in the Bahamas. During this same time there was a large movement of Haitians into the Bahamas. Pierre also had contact with Dr. Paul Orjala (pioneer missionary to Haiti) while ministering in Haiti. Due to this affiliation, Pierre wrote to Nazarene Headquarters requesting permission to start a Nazarene work in Nassau. Permission was granted and Pierre began to pastor a Haitian Creole-speaking church in a facility owned by a physician. This facility attracted both Bahamians and Haitian immigrants. Shortly they began to have bi-lingual services utilizing interpreters. In a few years membership was at 200 with Sunday attendance averaging 400.

In 1975, an unusual development occurred for the Church of the Nazarene. On the island of Grand Bahamas, north of Nassau, two couples received a Nazarene MANUAL through an acquaintance. After they had read and studied it, they decided to build a church at Eight Mile Rock and give it to the Nazarene church. In two years its membership was 100 people.

In 1983 Rev. Hilton Outten, one of the founders of the Eight Mile Rock church, became the first Bahamian District Superintendent, with others following. During the next two decades the Church of the Nazarene was started on other neighboring islands. Strong English-speaking churches were established in Freeport, Grand Bahamas, and in the capital city of Nassau.

Rev. Pierre died after a short illness in the 1980s. Interestingly, his church requested that his wife Rosalyn pray about becoming the pastor. After prayer and fasting she accepted their offer. She was ordained and pastored the original Nazarene church in The Bahamas until 2003 when she retired. Work is still vibrant and growing in The Bahamas and currently the total membership for the churches in The Bahamas is 1700+.

Sources: Parker, J. Fred. Mission to the World: A History of Missions in the Church of the Nazarene through 1985. Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, MO, 1988.

The Pentecostal movement had a constituency of about 24,000 adherents in 2005; it is represented by the Assemblies of God, the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), the Church of God of Prophecy, and smaller groups. Pentecostal influence began in 1909 when a Negro couple from

the Bahamas was converted in Florida and brought back the Pentecostal message. Along with a retired Methodist minister, they were the founders of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) in the Bahamas. In 1980, this denomination reported 57 affiliated congregations in the Bahamas.

In 1928, the first Assembly of God was founded in the city of Nassau. The Bahamian Council of the Assemblies of God was organized in 1955. In 1980, there were 17 Assemblies of God churches with over 2,400 adherents; in 2005, there were an estimated 30 churches with 4,800 adherents, which did not indicate much growth compared to what this denomination has reported in many other countries.

The Bahamas Christian Council, affiliated with the **World Council of Churches**, includes a spectrum of churches, from Lutherans and Pentecostals to Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics.

Other Religions

Non-Protestant marginal Christian bodies include the **Jehovah's Witnesses** that arrived in 1926 (officials reported 31 churches with 1,658 members and had an estimated 4,195 adherents in 2008); and the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** (Mormons), founded in 1979, with three churches and 820 members in 2007.

Freemasonry: Scottish Freemasonry in The Bahamas can trace its origins to as early as 1806 with the Turks Island Lodge No. 275 receiving a Charter from the Grand Lodge of Scotland (The Bahama and Turks Islands were both recognized as one country at that time). There were other Lodges which were granted Charters from the Grand Lodge, most of them attached to military regiments based in the islands during that period.

Scottish Freemasonry laid dormant in The Bahamas until 1967 with the consecration and erection of Lodge St. Michael, No. 1634 thanks to the valiant efforts of a giant of a man and mason, Brother Dr. Claudius R. Walker and other men too numerous to mention in this short welcome. We are indebted to these masons of vision and fortitude. Today, there are seven (7) Lodges under the District Grand Lodge of The Bahamas working on the islands of New Providence, Grand Bahama and Eleuthera.

The tenets of Freemasonry tell us that we are to promote Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth and it is our wish to encourage every Brother to engender these tenets in our hearts. This web-site enables our Brethren near and far to be close to us at all times and will greatly assist all Brethren to maintain a close relationship with our District Grand Lodge.

Myalism and Obeah are reportedly practiced in secret by some Bahamians, especially those who are not active members of Christian churches. Myalism is an African-derived belief system that development among blacks in the British West Indies during the slavery period. Obeah is the specific practice of "black magic" or witchcraft by sorcerers, known as "obeah-men." A small number of Bahamians and Haitians, particularly those living in the Family Islands, practice Obeah, which has similarities to Vodou (or Voodoo) in Haiti.

Reportedly, there are numerous independent **spiritualist practitioners** in the Bahamas, who advertize themselves as: Energy Healer, Psychic Medium, Spiritual Teacher and/or Spiritualist Minister.

There are several thousand **Rastafarians** in the Bahamas. In May 2006, IRASCOM International (Bahamas Chapter) in conjunction with R.A.S. (Rastafari Association of Students) Bahamas held a national conference in Nassau, New Providence Island. The purpose of this rally was stated as follows: "We seek, at this gathering, to determine whither we are going and to chart the course of our destiny as sons and daughters of Rastafari here in The Commonwealth of

The Bahamas Islands. It is no less important that we know whence we came. An awareness of our past is essential to the establishment of our personality and our identity as Africans.”

There is a small **Jewish community** in the Bahamas centered at Freeport, as well as several spiritual assemblies of the **Baha’i Faith**.

Some members of the small, resident Guyanese and Asian Indian populations in the Bahamas practice **Hinduism** and other **South Asian religions**.

The Bahamian Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice.

In 2008, there were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. More than 90 percent of the population professes a religion, and anecdotal evidence suggests that most attend religious services regularly.

Compiled and Edited by Clifton L. Holland
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(3,009 words)

Additional resources:

AAR A236

Unto the Ancestors: Spiritual Renewal and Cultural Preservation of the Gullah Geechee Peoples

Gail M. Harley, University of South Florida

A direct link to the continent of Africa exists in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and north Florida. These Sea Islands were remote areas without bridges, and the journeys from one island to the others or to the mainland were made by boat. Gullah and Geechee cultures were developed on these coastal islands during the enslavement of Africans in America. Sharing melded experiences from their arduous Middle passages to the New World, their African heritage became not only preserved but flavored with their unique adaptation to the rare and isolated circumstances of life on the Sea Islands. The revitalization of Gullah Geechee culture yields the most significant data in the reconstruction of African heritage. It harbors within its culture potentially untainted avenues for the interpretation of African American religious history through music, ritual, art, drama, storytelling, and the recovery of items of antiquity.

http://www.aarweb.org/meetings/annual_meeting/past_and_future_meetings/2001/abstracts.asp

Shoutin', Gettin' Happy, Catchin' Holy Ghost!: Excerpts from Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro Baptist Faith by Mechal Sobel

"The Black Methodist Richard Allen was equally critical of what he recognized as African carryovers in Christian worship. He rejected groaning, shouting, clapping, ring-dancing, and all such activity. Music itself became suspect. When, in the 1840s, 'decorous music' was brought into the AME church, many older "sanctified" members could not tolerate it and left.

In stark contrast, the Baptists approved the use of the ring dance and the shout for Christian purposes. One should shout for Christian joy here on earth as one will shout in Heaven. "Getting Happy!" was taken as description of religious ecstasy, and it was expected to manifest itself in "shouting" and "moaning" – a special form of humming that probably has an African origin as well.

In vision travels, blacks "began to shout and praise God with the rest of the angels," and after visions believer after believer went about "shouting and getting happy." In fact, Black Baptists believed that "whenever the spirit begins to play on the main altar of your heart, you will cry out no matter where you are what people say.

Black Methodist continued to do "the holy dance," although they were "forbidden by the preachers."

In the old day, the shouters easily responded to sensitive associations. The Baptists did not restrain themselves; they moved so violently in trances that other in the congregation would have to try to hold them down.

The 'spirit would begin to move on the inside' and the body would move on the outside. While the old ring-shout was not preserved by most congregations, the ecstatic shout that been worked up in its midst was perpetuated, and the blacks sang out:

You will feel this ol' earth rock an' reel
I wonder where's my dear mother
She's been gone so long.
I think I hear her shoutin'
Around the Throne of God
Know you shoutin' happy, so sit down.

The Key African understanding which they retained was a spiritual one. In the melding of the African and Baptist Sacred Cosmos that occurred both in plantation congregations and in more acculturated urban areas, the core of the African and of the Baptist world views united to form a new whole. Blacks became Baptist. This union of the two world views was occasionally delayed, in part because of the many African folkways retained. The key retention and the key melding were spiritual phenomena: In the interpenetration of Sacred Cosmos, African concepts were merged with of white Baptists. As suggested, the African High God and the Christian God became one - a God close to man, but one who still sent messengers to lead is black people home. Spirit force or power was still recognized, but it was exerted by God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost, as well as by holy men. The African idea of separable souls, of the eternal "little me," found a proper place in the Afro-Christian cosmos, and the African goal of resolution and growth could be reached through a Christian life. The only formal African patterns where retention was significant were those which supported this interpenetration of the Sacred Cosmos. Among them were the shout and the moan, the dream and the vision. With the shout and the vision, the black knew his future and he appropriated an African past. His African soul, with its essential inner self, found means to travel to the Christian heaven while time past became the future.

While the African trance, shout and vision patterns helped bring the blacks to a Baptist faith, after they created a new black Baptist ethos their need for even these patterns changed. The crucial union of African and Christian world views, which was at a spiritual level, was maintained while many African customs were abandoned.

Pooky's Note:

The shout and the ring shout are a little different. It has almost died out, except on the Georgia Sea Islands.

Source: <http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-30530.html>

Pooky

Apr 6, 2009, 07:08 PM

Africa West,

I finally had the time to read up on the Spiritual/Shouter Baptists. It would appear that the powers that be saw them as a threat. This is similar to the Denmark Vesey area. Denmark and his folks were members of the African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, SC. They were totally independent of any white scrutiny or control, which was very unusual. They used the church as front to meet to plot rebellion. When Denmark's plan was discovered, by accident, the church was destroyed. The members had to go in hiding and meet secretly.

The reason that the whites hate Haiti and makes life for the folks as hard as possible is they are still sore that Africans defeated the most powerful military force in the world at that time. The Africans kicked Napoleon and his French army's butt. They lost about 50,000 men. The Africans gained courage through faith in their African Gods. They had no fear. Toussaint would wait until the malaria season to encourage the French to come into the interior. The French soldiers died coming and going. They had no immunity from malaria. I think Haiti reminds the powers that be what can be. Little Haiti beating the French up sent shock wave through the Western world, and Denmark Vesey and others on the mainland were aware of what the Haitians had done to the French. Napoleon had to sale his land on the mainland. This purchase doubled the US English territory.

This is a little off topic for this thread, but there are similarities. I found these videos very interesting. I will come back with more about the AA church. If you recall I said the three primary denominations are the Baptists, AMEs (African Methodist Episcopal Church), and the COGIC (Church of God in Christ). The COGICs are the largest Pentecostal sect. There are many smaller bodies. However, most AA Christians reside in these

three black church organizations.

Richard Allen, the founder of the AME church, had high disdain for the shout. He despised the African carryover in the people. He wanted it totally eliminated from the AME church. This was in 1792 when the church was formed. It has been over 200 years and the folk are still getting' dey shouts on.

Spiritual Baptists/Shouters

YouTube - Spiritual baptist Trinidad

YouTube - shouter baptists - Trinidad

YouTube - SHOUTER BAPTISTS

YouTube - Spiritual Baptist Music Session

YouTube - Orisha Trinidad and Tobago, elder Singing for Osain.

YouTube - Trinidad and Tobago Orisha Music

YouTube - Orisha Dance

Source: <http://nigeriavillagesquare.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-30530.html>