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**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
RELIGION IN BARBADOS**

By Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES

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PROLADES

Apartado 1524-2050, San Pedro, Costa Rica
Telephone (506) 2283-8300; FAX (506) 2234-7682
Internet: <http://www.prolades.com/>
E-Mail: prolades@racsa.co.cr

Religion in Barbados

Country Summary

Barbados, a mere 166 square miles in size, is the most easterly of the Windward Antilles, located to the north of Venezuela. The highest point is Mount Hillaby at 1,105 feet, which is located toward the center of the island. There are no rivers and rainwater percolates quickly through the soil to form underground channels.

The country is home to 275,719 (Census estimate for July 2009) people, of which 90 percent are descendents of African slaves brought to the island as laborers on British sugar plantations; 4 percent are white; and the remaining six percent are Asian and mixed race. The capital and largest city is Bridgetown, with a population of 96,578 (2006). About 40 percent of the population is urban.

Barbados was discovered by the Portuguese in 1536 and named after the “bearded” fig trees found there. The island was settled in 1627 by the British and remained under British administration until 30 November 1966, when Barbados became an independent nation within the British Commonwealth of Nations. The official language is English.

The Head of State is the British monarch, represented by a governor-general. There is a bicameral Parliament: a 21-member designated Senate and a 24 member elected House of Assembly, which elects the Prime Minister.

Barbados was originally home to the Arawak Amerindians and was one of the few islands in the Caribbean not taken over by the Carib. The Spanish first landed there in the early 1500s and repaid the kindness of the Arawak people with a wholesale massacre. When the British returned a century later, they found the island uninhabited. Looking for farmland rather than mineral wealth, they settled the land and established a plantation system based on sugarcane, which required the importation of large numbers of slaves from West Africa. Although slavery was abandoned in 1834, universal voting rights were not extended to all citizens regardless of race until 1951.

Historically, the Barbadian (or Bajans) economy has depended on sugarcane cultivation and related activities. However, in recent years the economy has diversified into light industry and tourism, with about three-quarters of GDP and 80 percent of exports attributed to the services sector. Since 2003, the economy has rebounded due to increases in construction projects and tourism revenues. This reflects the success of the high-end economic sector, which will likely face declining revenues with the current global economic downturn.

Currently, the nation enjoys one of the highest per capita incomes in the West Indies. Offshore banking and information services are important sources of foreign exchange and thrive from being in the same time zone as Eastern U.S. financial centers and from having a relatively highly-educated workforce. The government continues its efforts to reduce unemployment, encourage direct foreign investment, and privatize state-owned enterprises.



Current Religious Situation

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The government generally respected religious freedom in practice.

According to the 2000 official census (total population of 268,792), more than 95 percent of the population was considered Christian, although not all of these were active in any particular denomination. The Anglican Church constituted the largest religious group, with 70,000 adherents (about 25 percent of the population); an estimated 67 percent were active members (46,900). The next largest group was the Seventh-day Adventist Church, numbering 16,000 adherents (5.7 percent), 10,000 of whom were active members. There were 11,000 Roman Catholic adherents (3.9 percent); an estimated 20 percent were active members. Pentecostal adherents numbered 7,000 (2.5 percent); more than 50 percent were active members. Methodists numbered 5,000 (1.8 percent), according to church officials, although many more claimed Methodist affiliation in the previous official census; an estimated 60 percent were active members. Evangelical Baptists, Spiritual Baptists, Moravians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) were present in small numbers. The number of non-Christians was also small. **(check these statistics with the Barbados Census Office)**

In addition to the more established denominations, the island's villages contain numerous independent store-front churches that cater to the lower-class who face the constant struggles and difficulties of everyday life amid acute poverty.

Barbados is often portrayed as having a highly-religious society because of the large variety of religious groups present. Normally, women make up the majority of those active in religious groups, while few men are in attendance. Many of the Protestant religious groups are fundamentalist and revivalistic, and preach a strict moral code that does not have much appeal to the island's young people or to the male population in general.

During the late 1990s, Barbados reportedly had 1,769 local churches that represented more than 100 denominations and independent religious groups.

Overview of Religious Development

The **Church of England** was established with the arrival of the first British settlers in 1626. The oldest church is St. James Parish Church located in Holetown, where the English settlers landed in Barbados. The original structure was built in the 1600s but was severely damaged by a hurricane. In 1690 a stone structure was built to replace the wooden building. The Church of St. Michael was dedicated in 1665 in Bridgetown. In 1795, the Anglican "Slave Conversion Society" (later known as the Christian Faith Society) was established under the Bishop of London. **The Church Missionary Society**, led by evangelical Anglicans, began work in Barbados in 1794, which later resulted in the formation of the **Barbados Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge** and the founding of schools for the colored (mixed race) and black population. The Diocese of Barbados was created in 1824, which included the Windward and Leeward Islands, along with Trinidad-Tobago and Guyana. This jurisdiction is now an integral part of the **Anglican Church of the Province of the West Indies**, whose archbishop currently resides in Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas. About 28 percent of all Barbadians considered themselves Anglicans in 2000, compared to 40 percent in 1980. There are about 60 Anglican churches in Barbados.

The non-conformist Quakers, Moravians and Methodists came to Barbados in 1680, 1765 and 1788, respectively. By the time a census was taken in 1680, about 500 of the 20,000 white people on Barbados were **Quakers (also called Society of Friends)**. Many faced arrest for refusing to fund the Anglican Church, take oaths, participate in the militia, or pay taxes to maintain forts. They condemned Anglican clergymen, disrupted their services, and wrote papers critical of the Established Church. By the 1680s, Quakers maintained five meetinghouses and several cemeteries, paid for their own poor relief, and kept their own records of births, deaths, and marriages.

The Quakers sought to convert slaves and improve their working and living conditions, which led to the passage of laws prohibiting this practice. Despite their efforts, the Quakers failed in their experiment to transform the culture of Barbados. By the 1790s, the Quaker presence on that island had vanished. Many of them simply just moved to Pennsylvania, while persecution drove others from the island.

Ultimately, the Quaker movement on Barbados “ended with a whimper,” stated Larry Gragg (2009). “They challenged the very powerful plantation power structure and lost,” he says. “It was an extraordinary challenge, but today there’s little evidence that they had much impact. But they did have the local government frightened for two decades.”

The German Moravian Brethren (Moravians) developed a special interest in evangelizing and defending the black plantation workers. They established their first mission at Sharon in St. Thomas Parish in 1765. The Moravians of Barbados are part of the **Moravian Church, Eastern West Indies Province**, with headquarters in Antigua. Currently, there are 10 local Moravian churches on Barbados.

After the American Revolutionary War, **British Methodists** redirected some of their energy away from their former work in North America to evangelization in the Caribbean in 1788. Today, the Barbadian Methodists (adherents were 5.1 percent of the total population in 2000), are part of the **Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas**, with headquarters in Antigua.

In 1834, the Scotts Baptist colporteur James Thompson (b.1778 – d.1854), a representative of the **British and Foreign Bible Society**, visited Barbados and made the island his base of operations in the Caribbean. He organized a local Bible Society and distributed the Scriptures to freed African slaves in the region, although no churches were organized through his efforts. The first Baptist church to be established in Barbados took place 1890 by independent missionaries related to the **National Baptist Convention** (Afro-American) in the USA. By 1908, there were three organized Baptist churches – at St. Thomas, Bridgetown and St. Johns – with a total membership of 105 under the supervision of two missionaries, A. S. Phillips and T. E. Smith.

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing through the 20th century, numerous mainline U.S. Protestant and **Free Church** denominations began mission work in Barbados. Among the earliest to arrive was the **African Methodist Episcopal Church** (1897), which a decade previously had opened work in the Bahamas. Among the most successful of the new missionary efforts was the **Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)**, which sent its first missionaries to the island in 1936 and founded the **New Testament Church of God**. Other Pentecostal denominations include the **Apostolic Faith Mission, Church of God in Christ, Church of God of Prophecy, New Dimensions Ministries** (founded in 1999), **Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada** and its affiliated regional church body, the **Pentecostal Assemblies of the West Indies, Pentecostal Church of God, Restoration Ministries** (founded in 1985), and the **United Pentecostal Church**.

The Wesleyan Holiness tradition is represented by the **Bible Missionary Church, Church of God Restoration Movement (Anderson, IN), Church of the Nazarene, The Salvation Army, United Holy Church of America, United Holiness Church of Faith in Christ,** and the **Wesleyan Holiness Church.**

The work of the **Wesleyan Holiness Church** was initiated by the former **Apostolic Holiness/Pilgrim Holiness Church** in 1912. In May 1923, Immanuel Mission, under the leadership of the Rev. J. M. Humphrey, united with the Pilgrim Holiness Church. Between 1912 and 1929, twenty-nine congregations and preaching points were established in nine parishes, with the exception of St. James and St. Andrew. The Sunday School enrollment reached 2,500 and the church membership was 1,288 persons. This period is regarded as the most successful “harvest season” in the history of this denomination.

The 1930’s brought economic depression in the country and a decline in membership of the Pilgrim Holiness Church. One congregation was lost due to a schism, in Carrington Village. In 1937 the first national District Superintendent, the Rev. L. S. Brathwaite, was elected. Hurricane Janet in 1955 struck another physical and psychological blow to the progress of the Pilgrim Holiness Church, as well as to other denominations. Seven Pilgrim church buildings were destroyed and five sustained damage. The Lodge Road building in Christ Church collapsed killing 16 persons.

Emergency teams were formed and, in three months, all seven church buildings were rebuilt, two of them were in better condition than before Hurricane Janet. In addition, a portable tabernacle was built and placed at Wilson Hall, St. John. By 1958, the Pilgrim Holiness Church had erected churches in all 11 parishes and a Theological College at Barbarees Hill, St. Michael. In 1968, there was a merger between the Pilgrim Holiness Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Church in the USA, which resulted in the formation of **The Wesleyan Church of North America.** The affiliated churches in the Caribbean adopted the name **The Wesleyan Holiness Church.** By 2001, the total church membership in Barbados had grown to 3,500 persons.

Dr. A. Wingrove Taylor was the General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Holiness Church for many years; he also served as president of the Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association, CETA, and as the Executive Secretary of the Evangelical Association of the Caribbean, EAC).

The Church of God Reformation Movement (Anderson, IN). Between 1906 and 1909, the Rev. Noah S. Duncan of the Church of God disembarked in Barbados three times. In 1906, he established a mission in Trinidad and soon after that had occasion to stop at Barbados on his way back to the USA. During this stopover he distributed literature to the people, who showed great interest.

The work permanent work of this denomination was started by a Barbadian, Philip Scantlebury, who for some years lived in the USA. He returned to Barbados in 1912 to visit his mother who was ill. While there, he gathered together a small group of people in Mile-and-a-Quarter, where his parents lived, and started open-air services under a tamarind tree. The group increased in size and Scantlebury rented a small building where he continued to hold services.

In the meantime, two Church of God missionaries, the Revs. J. Frank Shaw and George A. Coplin who had left the USA to visit Trinidad, decided to visit Barbados and see about establishing mission work there. They left Trinidad and arrived in Barbados on 17 March 1912. Scantlebury met them and took them over to Mile-and-a-Quarter. That same night they started revival meetings that lasted for two or three weeks. Shaw and Coplin rented a house near the Scantleburys and settled down to live in Barbados. Two months later, however, Coplin was recalled to Trinidad and Shaw was left in charge of the work.

Shaw had very little previous experience, so he was rather timid about having to be in charge of a local church, whose membership had now reached 40. He started prayer meetings, which were held every morning at different homes in the village. Shaw was encouraged by the arrival of Miss Maude Smith from Trinidad, who had left the USA for the West Indies together with Shaw and Coplin but had remained in Trinidad; now she came over to Barbados to help him in the work.

In 1913, the infant church group moved from Mile-and-a-Quarter to the Reef in Bridgetown, where a tent was erected and services started. It was at this time that Mr. and Mrs. Blewitt arrived for a visit from the USA. He was later to play an important part in the purchase of a property as a home for the missionaries. This was the humble beginning of this denomination in Barbados. Currently, there are 17 organized churches in Barbados of this denomination.

This small island nation is where the **Church of the Nazarene** began its mission work in the English-speaking West Indies. In the mid-1920s, Rev. J. D. Scott recruited J. I. Hill, then superintendent of the Southern California District, to officially begin the work of the Church of the Nazarene in Barbados. When they arrived they were greeted by a woman named Carlotta Graham who had migrated to the USA 13 years earlier and had in 1925, at the time of her mother's death, returned to Barbados and decided to stay. It was, however, during her time in New York that she was exposed to the Church of the Nazarene. She even graduated from Eastern Nazarene College, located near Boston, MA. Immediately Hill asked her to be a part of the missionary team. Throughout the years she proved to be an invaluable worker.

In 1927, General Superintendent Dr. Reynolds held the first District Assembly, when eight churches and 289 members were reported. It was also during this time that Barbados and the infant work in Trinidad were combined into one district. Therefore, the missionary team was responsible for two separate islands under one district, the West Indies. Through the years the church experienced steady growth.

During the 1960s, the Nazarenes reported 31 churches and 1,217 members. In 1965, tent evangelism was begun on Barbados, which proved to be a fruitful enterprise. After the nation's Independence from Great Britain in 1966, there was an increase in national pride and awareness that motivated national church leaders to take the initiative for guiding and growing the Nazarene Church. In 1976, the Church of the Nazarene in Barbados achieved mission district status as a self-supporting entity, which allowed it to be fully represented at the General Assembly. This proved to be a great accomplishment, as it was at that General Assembly that one of their own was elected to the General Board to represent the Intercontinental Zone II (Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean).

In 1985, the phenomenal growth of the early years ended: the Barbados district reported 32 churches, the same as in 1956, with a membership of 1,828. Since then, the Barbados District of the Church of the Nazarene has engaged in aggressive evangelism and discipleship, which increased the total church membership to more than 3,200 by 1988.

Other Protestant denominations include: Baptist International Missions (1979, nine churches with 1,500 members in 2000), the Barbados Christian Mission (currently with nine churches in Barbados; an independent Baptist denomination with affiliated churches in Trinidad, Guyana, Panama and USA – Brooklyn-NY and NJ), Berean Bible Church (founded in 1956 by missionary Kermit Hansen, who originally came to Barbados in 1946), Brethren Assemblies (1889, Plymouth Brethren: four congregations), Grace Bible Church, independent Christian churches/churches of Christ, Free Will Baptist Association, National Baptist Convention in the USA (became re-established in 1977), Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the Windward Islands

Mission of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (1972, later renamed the Barbados Baptist Convention: four churches with 420 members in 2000).

The East Caribbean Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, organized in 1926, includes the islands of Barbados (58 churches with about 19,200 members), Dominica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, which reported a total of 99 churches and 28,365 members in 2000 and 115 churches with 37,871 members in 2008. By August 2010, there were 116 churches with 38,417 members in the Conference. The first Adventist missionary arrived in Barbados in 1891, and the denomination has grown rapidly since its incorporation in 1933. By the author's calculations, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Barbados is the island's largest Protestant denomination based on reported membership, although the Anglican Church has more adherents.

The **Evangelical Association of the Caribbean (EAC)** has many affiliated members in Barbados. Some of the Protestant churches are members of the **Barbados Christian Council**, which is related to the **Caribbean Conference of Churches (CCC)**, founded in 1973, and through that organization to the **World Council of Churches (WCC)**.

The **Roman Catholic Church** had a late start in the British West Indies, and it was not until 1839 that the first Vicariate Apostolic was established with a bishop headquartered in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Although the first Catholic church was constructed on Barbados between 1840 and 1848, Catholics have remained a small minority. In the early and mid-20th century, the Catholic Church was bolstered by immigration from Guyana, Dominica and St. Lucia; and by immigration of Syrian and Lebanese Christians from Trinidad-Tobago. It is expanding slowly through natural growth and a small number of converts. Barbados had the smallest number of Roman Catholic adherents in the Windward Islands (10,000) in 1980, with only six parishes, nine priests and five schools. According to the 2000 Census, there were about 11,000 Roman Catholics or 3.9 percent of the population; an estimated 20 percent were active members.

Other Religions (2000 Census: other religions, 4.8 percent; none or unspecified, 20.6 percent)

Non-Protestant marginal Christian groups include: the **Christadelphians**; the **Jehovah's Witnesses** (30 churches with 2,430 members in 2008); the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** (founded in 1978, reported four churches with 696 members in 2007); the **St. Michael Christadelphian Mission** (Bank Hall Cross Road); the **Unity School of Christianity**; the **First Church of Christ, Scientist**, is located in Aquatic Gap, Bridgetown; and the **World-wide Church of God** (founded by Herbert W. Armstrong in Oregon, USA, in the 1930s).

Myalism and Obeah are reportedly practiced in secret by some Barbadians, especially those who are not active members of Christian churches. Myalism is an African-derived belief system that developed among blacks in the British West Indies during the slavery period; Obeah is the specific practice of "black magic" or witchcraft by priests, known as "obeahmen."

The **Spiritual Baptists** – known as "tie-heads" in Barbados in reference to the brightly colored cloth they wear tied around their heads – practice a hybrid religion of mixed African and Protestant belief systems. This Afro-Caribbean tradition was brought to Barbados from Trinidad in 1957 by "archbishop" Granville Williams. The Spiritual Baptist movement originated in Trinidad and Tobago during the early 20th century as a spirit-possession religion that is "Baptist" in name only. Its members believe themselves to be possessed by the Holy Spirit and are led to hand clap, foot stomp, dance, sing, or, most characteristically, shout. They came to be known as "shouters" by their early detractors.

Archbishop Williams, who was born in Barbados, lived in Trinidad and Tobago for sixteen years where he observed the local Spiritual Baptists. Williams became enthusiastic about the

Trinidadian movement where he claimed to have seen a vision and heard the voice of God. Upon returning to Barbados he held the first open-air meeting in Oistins, Christ Church. Two of the movement's prominent churches are **Jerusalem Apostolic Spiritual Baptist Church** and **Sons of God Apostolic Spiritual Baptist Church**, both in Earling Grove, Christ Church. Today, there are an estimated 10,000 Spiritual Baptist adherents on the island.

Rastafarianism was introduced to Barbados in 1975 from Jamaica. The Rastafarian movement began with the teachings of Marcus Garvey who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association in the 1920's. Rastafarians live a peaceful life, needing little material possessions and devote much time to contemplating the Holy Scriptures. They reject the white man's world, as the new age Babylon of greed and dishonesty. The proud and confident "Rastas" stand up for black rights, and are identified by their long hair, knotted in dreadlocks in the image of the Lion of Judah. The movement spread quickly in Barbados and was very attractive to the local black youths, who saw it as an extension of their adolescent rebellion from school and parental authority. With it came some undesirable elements (vagrancy, loose morals, use of marijuana and alcohol, etc.), but true Rastas stand for "peace and pride and righteousness." Also, there is an **Ethiopian Orthodox Church** on Hastings Main Road, Christ Church.

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

Barbados has one of the oldest **Jewish communities** in the Western Hemisphere, a community formed in 1650 by refugees from Brazil who escaped when the Portuguese retook land seized by the religiously tolerant Dutch. The Jewish community existed quietly on Barbados through the 18th century, with 275 Jews residing in Barbados in 1715. In 1820, Barbados became the first British colony to remove all political restrictions from the Jews. The Jewish community declined through the early 20th century, as many moved away to escape the poor economy. However, in 1932, when only one practicing Jew was left on the island, another group of Jewish immigrants arrived from Europe. The community grew and prospered, so that in 1987 they were able to reopen the old synagogue in Bridgetown, built in 1654, which is the second oldest synagogue in the Western Hemisphere (only the one in Curaçao is older). The synagogue is now a Barbados National Trust protected building and an active synagogue.

Buddhism is represented by the Tara Kadampa Buddhist Centre in Saint George, and by a Nichiren Daishonin group (address unknown). The **Baha'i Faith** came to Barbados in the 1960s and established a string of spiritual assemblies throughout the Windward Islands.

Today, Barbados has an estimated 4,500 **Asian Indians** living in the country. Most are recent immigrants, but the original East Indian community was formed by indentured servants who arrived after Emancipation and brought their religions with them. Because of the increased Asian Indian presence, both Islam and Hinduism have experienced growth in Barbados.

The Muslim population increased from 58 or 0.03 percent in 1946, to 336 or 0.14 percent in 1960, to 773 or 0.32 percent in 1980, to 1,657 or 0.66 percent in 2000. Thus, every twenty years, the Muslim population in Barbados has more than doubled in number and percentage of representation with respect to the rest of the Barbadian population. Most Muslims trace their ancestry to the Indian state of Gujarat. Immigrants from Guyana, Trinidad, South Asia and the Middle East, as well as approximately 200 native-born persons, constitute the growing Muslim community.

Muslim organizations on Barbados include the Barbados Muslim Association on Maxwell Terrace in Christ Church; the Islamic Teaching Centre in Harts Gap, Hastings, Christ Church; and the Juma Mosque on Kensington New Road, Bridgetown. In addition to these religious

institutions, the Muslims also have their own schools. There are about 500 **Hindus**, with the majority residing in Bridgeport; they are served by Sanatan Dhuram Maha on Synagogue Lane and the Sathya Sai Baba Centre at Welches Terrace, St. Michael.

Clifton L. Holland

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Note: In addition, many denominational sources were consulted, which are too numerous to list here.

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