

LATIN AMERICAN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROGRAM -  
PROGRAMA LATINOAMERICANO DE ESTUDIOS SOCIORRELIGIOSOS  
(PROLADES)

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

By Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES

Last revised on 10 December 2013

**PROLADES**

Apartado 1524-2050, San Pedro, Costa Rica  
Telephone: (506) 2283-8300; FAX: (506) 2234-7682

Internet: <http://www.prolades.com/>

E-Mail: [prolades@ice.co.cr](mailto:prolades@ice.co.cr)



# Religion in Guadeloupe

## Country Summary

Guadeloupe, an overseas department of France, includes several islands in the northeast edge of the Caribbean Sea, the main three islands being Basse-Terre, Grande-Terre, and Marie-Galante. Nine of the islands, with a land area of 1,706 square miles, are inhabited by some 461,000 people (2010 estimate).

## Historical Overview of Social, Political and Economic Development

The islands were originally inhabited by the Arawaks, who were in turn overrun by the Caribs during the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. During his second trip to the Americas, in November 1493, Christopher Columbus and his men became the first Europeans to land on Guadeloupe while seeking fresh water. Columbus called the island *Santa María de Guadalupe de Extremadura*, after the image of the Virgin Mary venerated at the Spanish monastery of Villuercas, in Guadalupe, Extremadura. The expedition came ashore just south of Capesterre, but left no settlers behind. During the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Caribs fought against an invasion of Spanish settlers and repelled them.



Finally, the Caribs were defeated by French forces during the 1630s, which led to the colonization of the islands and the development of the sugar industry. Over the next century, the British seized the island several times. The economy of Guadeloupe was based on the lucrative sugar trade, which commenced during the closing decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Guadeloupe produced more sugar than all the British Caribbean islands combined, worth an estimated £6 million a year. Although British forces captured the island in 1759, the British government decided that Canada was strategically more important and kept Canada while returning Guadeloupe to France in the Treaty of Paris (1763) that ended the war.

In 1790, following the outbreak of the French Revolution, the monarchists of Guadeloupe refused to obey the new laws of equal rights for the free people of color and attempted to declare independence. The ensuing conflict with the republicans, who were faithful to revolutionary France, caused a fire to break out in Pointe-à-Pitre that devastated a third of the town. The monarchists ultimately overcame the republicans and declared independence in 1791. The monarchists then refused to receive the new governor that Paris had appointed in 1792. In 1793, a slave rebellion broke out, which made the upper classes turn to the British and ask them to occupy the island.

In an effort to take advantage of the chaos ensuing from the French Revolution, Britain seized Guadeloupe in 1794, holding control from May to October 1794, when Governor Victor Hugues (a French politician and colonial administrator during the French Revolution, who governed Guadeloupe from 1794 to 1798) obliged the British general to surrender. Hugues succeeded in freeing the slaves, who then turned on the slave owners who controlled the sugar plantations.

Even though Hugues abolished chattel slavery, he still maintained a system of unpaid obligatory work. He reorganized the army, recruiting a large number of former African slaves, until his armed force grew to about 10,000 men. Soldiers of both African and European descent were integrated into the same units with no racial distinctions. Hugues ruled Guadeloupe for four years before being recalled to France and was replaced by General Edme Desfourneax. During his term of office, Hugues purged the island of counter-revolutionaries, using a guillotine brought from France, and also worked to create a viable post-slavery regime, in which the island's farms and plantations still functioned. With an army composed of White, Mulatto and ex-slave soldiers, Hugues worked to export the revolution to neighboring islands, including Dominica, Saint-Martin, Grenada, Saint-Vincent and Saint Lucia.

In 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte issued the Law of 20 May 1802 that restored slavery to all of the French colonies captured by the British during the French Revolutionary Wars, but did not apply to certain French overseas possessions such as Guadeloupe, French Guiana, and Saint-Domingue. Napoleon sent an expeditionary force to recapture Guadeloupe from the rebellious slaves. Mulatto military leader Louis Delgrès and a group of revolutionary soldiers blew themselves up on the slopes of Matouba volcano when it became obvious that the invading French troops would take control of the island and reinstitute slavery. Bonaparte's military forces killed approximately 10,000 Guadeloupens who resisted reoccupation.

On 4 February 1810 the British once again seized the island and continued to occupy it until 1816. By the Anglo-Swedish alliance of 3 March 1813, it was ceded to Sweden for a brief period of 15 months. However, the British administration continued in place and British governors continued to govern the island. In the Treaty of Paris of 1814, Sweden ceded Guadeloupe once more to France. An ensuing settlement between Sweden and the British gave rise to the Guadeloupe Fund. The Treaty of Vienna in 1815 definitively acknowledged French control of Guadeloupe.

In 1815, France renounced the slave trade and restructured its Caribbean possessions as colonies. Slavery was abolished, and to rebuild the labor force France contracted indentured servants from India who were brought to Guadeloupe. Following World War II, Guadeloupe was designated an overseas department, a status granting it much local autonomy.

Today, the population of Guadeloupe is mainly of African or mixed descent, speaking French and Antillean Creole. There are also Europeans, Asian Indians, Lebanese, Syrians, Chinese, and Carib Amerindians (remnants of the original pre-European population). The archipelago of Îles des Saintes is mostly populated by the descendants of French colonists from Brittany and Normandy.

The economy of Guadeloupe depends on tourism, agriculture, light industry and the service industry, but it especially depends on France for large subsidies and imports. Tourism is a key industry, with 83.3 percent of tourists coming from metropolitan France, 10.8 percent from the rest of Europe, 3.4 percent from the USA, 1.5 percent from Canada, and 1.0 percent coming from South America and the rest of the world. An increasingly large number of cruise ships visit the islands yearly.

The traditional sugar cane crop is slowly being replaced by other crops, such as bananas (which now supply about 50 percent of export earnings) and many varieties of flowers. Some vegetables and root crops are cultivated for local consumption, although Guadeloupe is still dependent on imported food, mainly from France. Light industry features sugar and rum, solar energy, and many industrial products. Most manufactured goods and fuel are imported.

Hurricanes periodically devastate the economy. For example, on 17 September 1989, Hurricane Hugo (category 4) caused extensive damage, destroyed 10,000 homes and left more than 35,000 homeless. Hugo destroyed 100 percent of the banana crop, and 60 percent of the sugar cane crop.

### **Current Religious Situation**

Freedom of religion in France and its dependent territories is guaranteed by the constitutional rights set forth in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Since 1905, the French government has followed the principle of *laïcité* (laicism or secularism), in which the State does not recognize any official religion (except for legacy statutes like that of military chaplains). Instead, it merely recognizes religious organizations, according to formal legal criteria that do not address religious doctrine. Conversely, religious organizations should refrain from intervening in the State's policy-making. In its strict and official acceptance, it is the principle of separation of church (or religion) and state.

About 83.5 percent of the population of Guadeloupe is Roman Catholic, about 5.0 percent is Protestant, about 5 percent belong to other religions, and 6.5 percent is unknown.

### **The Roman Catholic Church**

In 1523, the first Roman Catholic missionaries on the islands were killed by the Caribs, but later missionaries from the various orders (Jesuits, Capuchins and Dominicans) had more success following the establishment of French authority. In 1816, a prefecture for Guadeloupe and Martinique was established, and in 1850 Guadeloupe was named a suffragan diocese and attached to the Diocese of Bordeaux, in France. The first priest of African descent was ordained in 1925, and the first bishop in 1970. Today, Guadeloupen priests and nuns serve throughout the French-speaking world. The church considers more than 90 percent of the population to be Catholic adherents.

Today the Catholic Church in Guadeloupe is part of the Diocese of Basse-Terre (includes the territories of Guadeloupe, Saint Barthélemy and Saint Martin), under Bishop Jean-Yves Riocreux (since June 2012) whose headquarters are at the Basilique-Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Guadeloupe in Basse-Terre. There are 42 parishes in Guadeloupe. The 2012 statistical report reveals the following: 38 diocesan priests and 14 religious priests for a total of 52 priests; 11 permanent deacons, 14 male religious and 145 female religious (nuns).

### **The Protestant Movement**

Protestant missionary efforts began with the **Moravians**, who started work in the West Indies in the 1750s. They had only modest success in Guadeloupe, however. In the 1630s French Huguenot colonists settle on Guadeloupe, which was the basis for the development of the Reformed Church of the Antilles. Missionaries from the Reformed Church of France established the **Église Évangélique de la Guadeloupe** (the Evangelical Church of Guadeloupe), which reported 27 churches with about 2,500 members in 2010. **The Seventh-day Adventist Church**, which entered the field in 1965, is the largest Protestant body in the country with 61 churches and 12,136 members in 2010. The Adventist churches are part of the French Antilles-Guiana Union

Mission. The **Southern Baptist Convention** began work in Guadeloupe in 1964. In 2010, there were 13 affiliated Baptist churches with about 710 members. Also, there is one Charismatic Baptist church in Guadeloupe.

A variety of Holiness and Pentecostal groups, mainly from the USA, France and other Caribbean nations, have established small missions in Guadeloupe since World War II. These include the **Assemblies of God**, the **Church of God (Cleveland, TN)**, and the **Church of the Nazarene** from the USA. Most of the other Protestant groups have only one or two congregations.

## **Other Religions**

The French Government's "Observatory on Sects/Cults" was created in 1996 to analyze the phenomenon of cults and to develop proposals for dealing with them. In 1998, the Government issued a decree disbanding the Observatory and creating an Interministerial Mission in the Fight Against Sects/Cults (MILS), which is responsible for coordinating periodic interministerial meetings at which government officials can exchange information and coordinate their actions. Although the Government instructed the MILS to analyze "the phenomenon of cults" its decree did not define the term "cult" or distinguish cults from other religions.

On 21 December 2000, the MILS submitted its 2000 annual report. The report highlighted the globalization of cult influence, specifically in underdeveloped countries, and focused on the "infiltration" of NGOs by cults. The report evaluated the influence of cult movements in the country's three overseas departments: French Guyana, Guadeloupe and Martinique. A case study examined the **Anthroposophical Movement**, founded by Rudolf Steiner, and recommended sustained vigilance over the Steiner schools.

Among the religious groups mentioned in the MILS report are the **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)** and **Jehovah's Witnesses**. The Mormons began their work in 1982 and now have a small presence on Guadeloupe, with three organized churches and 470 members in 2010. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been more successful than the Mormons. They first arrived in the mid-1930s and by 2010 reported 131 organized groups with about 19,000 adherents (about 4.1 percent of the population). This indicates that Guadeloupeans have been strongly attracted to this marginal Christian group, no doubt as a result of the group's aggressive house-to-house visitation program and attractive literature.

Immigrants from the Tamil region of India arrived in Guadeloupe as contract workers (known as "coolies") in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The Tamil-descendants trace their roots to over 40,000 indentured workers who were brought from India to Guadeloupe beginning in 1861 to work on plantations through an agreement reached between France and the United Kingdom. The importation of Indian labor was gradually discontinued after 1883 as a result of adoption of a policy by the British Government against recruitment of labor in its territories and also because of the high mobility of Indian labor. **After their arrival in Guadeloupe, the Tamils developed a new religion that synthesizes elements of Catholicism and Hinduism.** It is centered upon two female deities, Malieman, who symbolizes the Virgin Mary, and Mariamma, the Tamil mother goddess of disease (healer of diseases like cholera, smallpox, and chicken pox) and the bringer of rain (fertility).

**Islam** has been brought to Guadeloupe by immigrants from Syria, mostly Sunnis. The following Islamic centers and mosques are located in Guadeloupe:

- Institut Musulman de la Guadeloupe, Abymes  
**URL:** <http://www.mosquee-guadeloupe.com>
- Association des Musulmans de la Guadeloupe, Abymes  
**URL:** <http://www.mosquee-guadeloupe.com>
- Association des Musulmans de la Guadeloupe, Pointe-a-pitre  
**URL:** <http://www.mosquee-guadeloupe.com>
- Association Al Madina, Les Abymes  
**URL:** [www.gwadislam.fr](http://www.gwadislam.fr)

There are also members of the **Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis (AMORC)**, an Ancient Wisdom religious group, in Guadeloupe.

Compiled and edited by Clifton L. Holland  
Last updated on 10 December 2013

#### Sources

- Annuaire Électronique des Églises Évangéliques de la France et le Luxembourg (includes French territories in the Caribbean) website: <http://www.eglises.org/>
- Augier, F. R., et al. *The Making of the West Indies*. London, England: Longman Group Limited, 1960.
- Brady, R. E. *Guadeloupe: Mission Field in the West Indies*. Brookhaven, MS: the author, 1966.
- Brierly, Peter. *World Churches Handbook*. London, England: Christian Research, 1997.
- CNEF (le Conseil National des Évangéliques de France) website:  
<http://www.eglises.org/responsables/>
- Catholic Hierarchy website for the Diocese of Basse-Terre at: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dbass.html>
- CNEF (le Conseil National des Évangéliques de France) website:  
<http://www.eglises.org/responsables/>
- Dryfoot, Arthur Charles. *The Shaping of the West Indian Church, 1492-1962*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999; published jointly with The Press University of the West Indies in Jamaica.
- Fernández Olmos, Margarite y Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, editores. *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the Caribbean*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Glazier, Stephen D. (editor). *Encyclopedia of African and African-American Religions*. New York City, NY: Routledge, 2001.
- Government of India, Report on the High Level Commission on Indian Diaspora, December 2001: <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/contents.htm>
- Horowitz, Michael M., editor. *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean: An Anthropological Reader*. Garden City, NY: The Natural History Press, 1971.
- La Croix, O. "The French Presence and the Church in Martinique and Guadeloupe." In *New Mission for a New People: Voices from the Caribbean*, D. I. Mitchell, ed. New York: Friendship Press, 1977.
- LDS Newsroom, Facts and Statistics for Guadeloupe:  
<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/guadeloupe>
- 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.

Rogozinski, Jan. *A Brief History of the Caribbean, from the Arawak and Carib to the Present*. Revised Edition. New York City, NY: Plume Books – Penguin Group, 1999.

Seventh-day Adventist Church, French Antilles-Guiana Union Mission website:  
[http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view\\_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10050](http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10050)

(about 2,478 words)