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

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# Religion in Martinique

## Country Overview

Martinique is located in the Lesser Antilles on the eastern edge of the Caribbean Sea, north of Trinidad and Tobago. About 390,370 people (January 2012) live on the island's 436 square miles (1,128 square km) of land. Most of the present population is descended from African slaves who came to the island beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: African and African-white-Indian mixture 93.4 percent, French white 3 percent, East Indian 1.9 percent, Chinese and other groups 1.7 percent (2000).

## Social, Political and Economic Development

Prior to the discovery of Martinique by Columbus in 1493, the area was inhabited by Arawak and Carib Indians. There was no real European interest in the island until French colonies were established in 1635. Though the British made brief attempts to occupy the island during the 18th and 19th centuries, it has remained under French control since 1635 (along with Guadeloupe).

After slavery was declared legal in 1664, enslaved Africans began to arrive, and the French began to develop the sugarcane industry. During the 1700s, Africans became the major component of the population and were responsible for a series of antislavery revolts. Although slavery was abolished in 1794, it was reintroduced by Napoleon in 1802. It is believed that Napoleon's decision was

strongly effected by his wife, the Empress Josephine, who was born on Martinique. Slavery was finally abolished by the French in 1848. Chinese and Indian (primarily from the Tamil region) contract laborers (known as "coolies") were brought to Martinique to replace the former African slaves who refused to work on the sugarcane plantations.

The island became the site of one of the most famous of modern disasters when on May 8, 1902, volcano Mount Pele erupted and within a matter of minutes killed all but one of the inhabitants in the town of Saint Pierre (approximately 30,000 people).

In 1946, both islands of the French Antilles were given the status of Overseas Departments. There was little political movement until 1974 when Martinique, along with Guadeloupe and French Guiana, were given regional status entailing some local political and economic autonomy.

The country is an overseas department of France; its capital city is Fort-de-France. The



president of France is the chief of state; the French president is elected by popular vote for a five-year term and he appoints a Prefect to rule Martinique on the advice of the French Ministry of Interior; the presidents of the General and Regional Councils are elected by the members of those councils. The Martinique people elect two representatives to serve in the French Senate. There are 45 seats in the Martinique legislative branch; members are elected by popular vote to serve six-year terms. There is also a unicameral Regional Assembly or Conseil Regional (41 seats; members are elected by popular vote to serve six-year terms).

Historically, Martinique's economy relied on agriculture, but by the beginning of the 21st century this sector had dwindled considerably. Sugar production has declined and most of the sugarcane is now used for the production of rum. Banana exports are increasing, mostly to France. Most of the meat, vegetable, and grain products consumed on the island must be imported, which causes a chronic trade deficit that requires large annual transfers of aid from France. Tourism has become more important than agricultural exports as a source of foreign exchange. In 2000 the island hosted 500,000 tourists, and the tourism industry employed seven percent of the total workforce. Roughly 16 percent of the total businesses on the island (some 6,000 companies) provide tourist-related services.

The official language of Martinique for its government, schools, newspapers, and media is French. However, the vernacular which is spoken in most informal and family contexts is Creole, which is derived mostly from French (with contributions from African, Amerindian and English dialects). Martinique Creole is particularly expressive and idiomatic, with a relatively simple grammatical structure. It originally developed out of the need for African slaves of different ethnolinguistic groups to communicate among themselves as well as to understand the language of their French slave masters. Martinique Creole is becoming increasingly French as a result of cultural influences from France. Although Standard French is widely spoken, it is spoken with a distinctive French West Indian accent.

### **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.

Today, about 80 percent of the Martinique population is Roman Catholic, about 10 percent is Protestant, about 2 percent is Jehovah's Witnesses, about 4.5 percent belong to other religious groups, and 3.5 percent is unknown.

### **Overview of Christian Development**

The **Roman Catholic Church** came to Martinique with the French occupation, beginning in 1635, and was established by members of the Dominican, Jesuit, and Capuchin religious orders. A diocese was established in 1850, but the church had a significant problem recruiting priests. In 1909 the island was placed under the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith at the

Vatican, which asked the Holy Ghost Fathers to assume responsibility for the island. Though the overwhelming majority of the population professes the Catholic faith, church attendance is relatively low. The single bishop for Martinique resides in Fort-de-France.

The **Reformed Church of France** entered the island informally, as the result of French government and military personnel stationed there, and it continues primarily as an expatriate church with about 100 members.

The **Seventh-day Adventist Church** began missionary work on the island in 1924. The Martinique Conference, organized in 1974, is now part of the French Antilles-Guiana Union Mission. In 2010, there were 66 organized churches with 14,964 members in Martinique Conference.

Several independent Baptist missionaries from the USA entered Martinique in 1945 and have since built a substantial presence: there are 16 **independent Baptist churches** with about 770 members. In addition, the **Southern Baptist Convention**, which began its work in 1974, reports seven churches with about 470 members. The **Evangelical Baptist Church Association** reports 12 churches with about 390 members. The **Evangelical Baptist Federation** has about five churches with a total of 100 members. In summary, there are a total of 40 Baptist churches with about 1,730 members.

**The Church of the Nazarene**, which began its work in 1976, reports four churches with a total membership of about 150 people. Present also are several Protestant denominations that originated in France:

- Communautés et Assemblées Évangéliques de France (CAEF)
- Fédération des Églises Chrétiennes Évangéliques (FECE)
- Fédération des Églises et Communautés Baptistes Charismatiques (FECBC)
- Mission Chrétienne Évangélique de la Martinique (MCEM)
- Union des Églises de la Mission du Plein Évangile de la Martinique (UEMPEM)

There are numerous Pentecostal denominations in Martinique. The **Assemblies of God** reports 43 churches with 3,050 members; the **Church of God (Cleveland, TN)** has several churches with about 520 members; the **Church of God of Prophecy** reports five churches with about 250 members; and the **International Church of the Foursquare Gospel** has one congregation.

## **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**. Although the Mormons began their work in 1984, the LDS reported only one church with about 200 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 58 organized groups with about 10,800 adherents (about two percent of the population). This indicates that people 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.

Throughout the slavery period and beyond a parallel system of beliefs and practices, known as *quimbois*, has existed alongside Christianity. **Quimbois** encompasses plant and herb remedies, sorcery and spiritual healing, and it is deeply embedded within popular culture. A version of 19<sup>th</sup> century **Hinduism**, brought to the West Indies by south Indian immigrants, still survives among the Hindustani-descent population where the burning of incense, garlanding of statues, and offering of sacrifices in small temples and shrines are still practiced. Some Hindu practitioners and *quimboiseurs* may also consider themselves to be Catholic while the local **Rastafarians**—a sect that began in Jamaica and worships the late emperor Haile Selassie—break more strongly with Western culture and religion.

The **Maldevidan religion**, a syncretistic mixture of Hinduism and Catholicism, is found primarily in the northern part of Martinique. The principle deity is Maldevidan, who is pictured riding a horse and often identified as Jesus Christ. Mari-eman, the principal female deity, is also identified as the Virgin Mary and the mother of Maldevidan. As with Vodou, Maldevidan ceremonies involve dancing, drumming, ritual possession by spirit entities, and animal (sheep, roosters) sacrifice, communal meals.

There is a small **Jewish community** on Martinique that finds its focus in a single Orthodox center in Fort-de-France. **Islam** is present in a small community of Syrian expatriates. The first spiritual assembly of the **Baha'i Faith** was established during the 1960s. **The Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis (AMORC)** reports several affiliated lodges.

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