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

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# Religion in Montserrat

## Country Overview

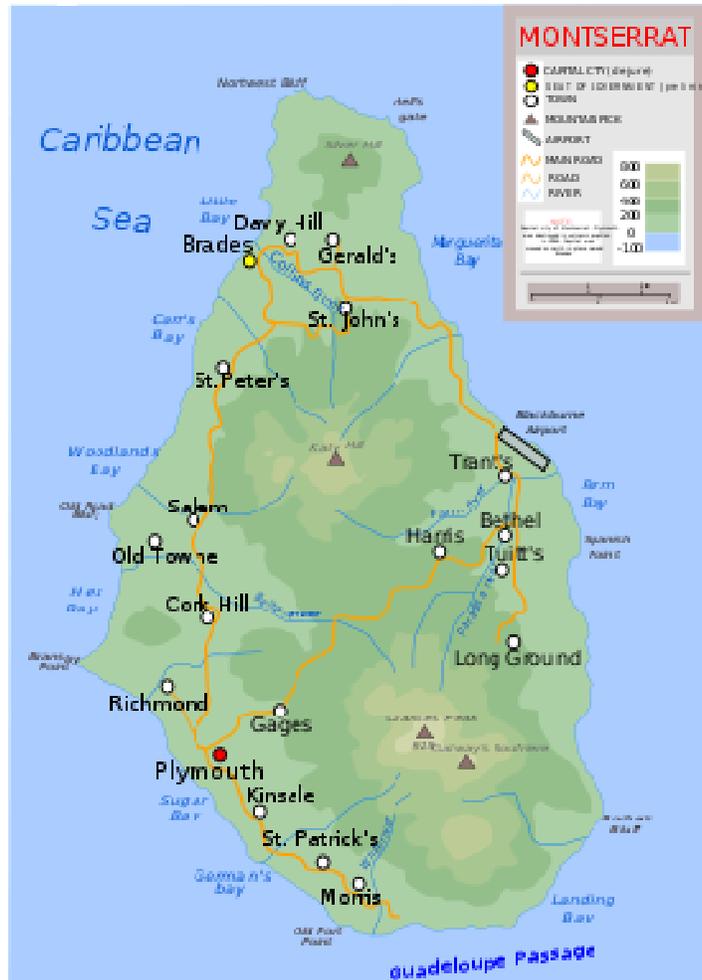
Montserrat is an island of the Lesser Antilles on the northeastern edge of the Caribbean Sea, southwest of Antigua. Its 39 square miles of land (102 sq km) is dominated by the Soufriere Hills Volcano. The island is entirely volcanic in origin and contains seven active volcanoes. Columbus named Montserrat after the mountain in Spain on which Ignatius Loyola established of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits).

In the early hours of 17 September 1989, Hurricane Hugo (Category 4) struck Montserrat with full force, producing sustained winds of 140 miles per hour. It damaged more than 90 percent of the structures on the island, and the tourist industry was virtually wiped out. Within a few years, the island had recovered considerably, only to be damaged again later by volcanic activity.

Much of the island was devastated and two-thirds of the population fled abroad due to the eruption of the Soufriere Hills volcano that began on 18 July 1995 (the volcano has erupted continuously since then). Whereas the population in 1986 was estimated at 12,000, the present population is reported to be 5,164 (2012). An estimated 8,000 refugees left the island, primarily to the UK, following the resumption of volcanic activity in July 1995.

After the Georgian-era capital city of Plymouth was abandoned in 1997 due to volcanic activity, interim government buildings were built at Brades Estate, in the Carr's Bay/Little Bay vicinity at the northwest end of Montserrat. The country is divided into three parishes: Saint Anthony, Saint Georges and Saint Peter.

Montserrat's population is 90 percent black and mulatto, with some whites of Irish ancestry. Shortly after the initial English settlement of the island in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a large group of Irishmen arrived on Montserrat. Whether they were exiled from Ireland or came voluntarily from other Caribbean islands remains unknown, but their legacy on Montserrat can be seen in a number of red-haired islanders.



## Overview of Social, Political and Economic Development

Montserrat was originally inhabited by the Carib people and was first sighted by Columbus in 1493. The English first colonized Montserrat in 1632. The island fell into French hands in 1662 for a four-year period and again in 1792-93. It has remained British ever since, however.

It was colonized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Irish people, driven from the island of St. Kitts, who began to plant sugarcane and cotton. The early settlers tried to make Montserrat a prosperous plantation island. They brought African slaves to the island to cultivate sugar, limes, and vegetables, but the terrain was simply too rugged to yield these crops in great quantities. The island never became the agricultural success that the settlers envisioned. The slaves were liberated in the middle of the 19th century, by which time they made up 90 percent of the population, the Carib's having all but disappeared.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, falling sugar-prices had an adverse effect on the island's economy, as a result of competition from other producing nations. In 1857, the British philanthropist Joseph Sturge bought a sugar estate in an attempt to prove it was economically viable to employ paid labor rather than slaves. Numerous members of the Sturge family bought additional land. In 1869 the family established the Montserrat Company Limited and planted lime trees, started the commercial production of lime juice, established a school, and sold parcels of land to the inhabitants of the island. Consequently, much of Montserrat came to be owned by smallholders.

Montserrat is still a colony of the United Kingdom, having previously been included with other colonies in the West Indian Federation. When the federation was dissolved in 1962, Montserrat's government was given semiautonomous status, though the governor is still appointed from London.

Queen Elizabeth II is the chief of state and she is represented in Montserrat by a Governor, whom she appoints. Following legislative elections, the leader of the majority party usually becomes chief minister. The head of government is a Chief Minister and his Executive Council consists of the governor, the chief minister, three other ministers, the attorney general, and the finance secretary. The unicameral Legislative Council has 11 seats, 9 popularly elected, with the attorney general and financial secretary sitting as ex-officio members; members serve five-year terms.

The **economy of Montserrat** was severely disrupted by volcanic activity that began in July 1995. Prior to this date, the small country had an export economy based on agriculture, clothing, electronic parts and plants, with a per capita gross national product of USD 3,000 to 8,000. The catastrophic eruption of the Soufrière Hills volcano in June 1997 closed the W. H. Bramble Airport and the seaport at Plymouth, which caused further economic and social dislocation. Two-thirds of the inhabitants fled the island. Some began to return in 1998, but the lack of housing limited population growth. The volcanic activity continues, currently mostly affecting the vicinity of Plymouth, including its docking facilities, and the eastern side of the island around the former W. H. Bramble Airport, the remnants of which were buried by lava flows on 11 February 2010.

The agriculture sector continued to be affected by the lack of suitable land for farming and by the destruction of crops. Prospects for the economy depend largely on developments in relation to the volcano and on public sector construction activity. The UK launched a three-year \$123 million aid program to help reconstruct the economy. Half of the island was expected to remain uninhabitable for another decade.

Today, Montserrat's main economic activity is based on construction and government services, which together accounted for about 50 percent of GDP in 2000 when it was EC\$76 million. In contrast, banking and insurance together accounted for less than 10 percent of GDP.

### **Current Status of Religion**

The population of Montserrat is primarily Anglican and Methodist. Approximately 33 percent are Anglican, 25 percent are Methodist, about 20 percent are Roman Catholics, and about 17 percent are Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal and other Protestant adherents. Other religions and those with no religion account for the remaining 5 percent.

### **Overview of Religious Development**

With the decline of the Caribs, Christianity became the dominant religion of Montserrat, and Anglicanism was its first and foremost representative beginning with British colonization in 1632. Anglican chaplains arrived with British occupation. As elsewhere in the British Caribbean, the Anglican Church (Church of England) served the White colonists, administrators and military personnel and supported the institution of slavery on which the island's economy was based. The Methodists began missionary work on the island in 1820 among the slaves and freedmen and were anti-slavery advocates. Methodists and other dissenting religious groups (such as Quakers, Moravians and Baptists) were persecuted by the Anglican establishment during the slavery era. After Emancipation in 1834, the Methodists were successful in establishing churches, schools and social welfare programs among the former slaves.

The Anglican diocese is attached to the Church of the Province of the West Indies, and the Methodists are part of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, both headquartered on the nearby island of Antigua. The Roman Catholic Church on Montserrat is part of the Diocese of Saint John's, also on Antigua. The Catholic Church has been present since the first Europeans arrived, although its adherents suffered legal discrimination until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Canadian Pentecostals came to Montserrat in 1910 and have built a thriving work, still related to the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. Subsequently, missionaries from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Pilgrim Holiness Church (arrived in 1936; since 1968 part of the Wesleyan Church), various Baptist groups (Baptist General Conference and independents), and the Church of God of Prophecy have also established churches as well as a variety of service ministries, including programs of theological education.

However, all of these religious groups have suffered from declining attendance and membership as a result of continuing volcanic activity and economic hardships. For example, the Methodists reported 13 churches with about 1,300 members in 1960, whereas in 2010 there were only three surviving churches and about 230 members.

## Other Religions

Adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i Faith, Rastafarians, Freemasonry and Spiritualist advisors have a limited presence on the island.

Regarding Freemasonry, it is generally believed that Freemasonry was brought into North America early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that immigrant Freemasons soon established lodges at several places, which they worked without the sanction of warrants. A lodge in Boston was the first in America to be regularly constituted under a lawful warrant from the Premier Grand Lodge of England which itself had only been formed in 1717. However, it is interesting to note that a lodge in Montserrat was second. The American "Weekly Mercury" for the 24th December 1734 recorded that on the 1st October preceding, the Earl of Crawford, Grand Master of the Society of Freemasons, has signed an instrument for establishing a lodge of masons in the island of Montserrat. The existing lodge on Montserrat, St. Anthony No.4684 EC (founded in 1924), is administered under the District Grand Lodge of Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean.

Alongside of Christianity in Montserrat the local variant of the Afro-Caribbean obeah and possession cult is the Jombee or Jumbie religion, although this is said to be disappearing. Jumbies are defined as spirits of the dead that are believed to influence and can help living persons. Montserrat's Jombee dance is (or was) the feast of food, music and dance that reinforces bonds with living and ancestral kin, sets the scene for spirit possession, and often functions as a healing ritual. Folk spirit healers continue to practice, even without an institutionalized Jombee dance, and the practice of obeah persists today.

The Leeward Islands Obeah Act, passed in 1904, was largely modeled on the Jamaican Obeah Law of 1898. It applied to Anguilla, Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, Nevis, St Kitts and the British Virgin Islands, and it remains the basis of the law in several of these territories. The expression "Obeah", as ordinarily understood and practiced, includes witchcraft and working or pretending to work by spells or by professed occult or supernatural power.

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