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**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:
RELIGION IN ST. KITTS & NEVIS**

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Religion in St. Kitts-Nevis

Country Summary

St. Kitts-Nevis (more formally, the Federation of Saint Christopher and Nevis) are two of the Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles on the northeast edge of the Caribbean Sea. They are located east of Puerto Rico and west of Antigua. The country has a total population of 40,100 (July 2009 estimate), and a total land area of 261 sq km (Saint Kitts 168 sq km; Nevis 93 sq km).

The St. Kitts is a shortened form of its official name, St. Christopher, given to it by Columbus when he first landed there in 1493. There is some controversy about whether it was named for himself or St. Christopher. In any event, it is commonly referred to as St. Kitts and the inhabitants call themselves Kittitians. Nevis is named after the Spanish word for snow because of a white cloud that often surrounds the island's single peak, Mount Liamuiga, at 1,156 meters above sea level.

With coastlines in the shape of a baseball bat and ball, the two volcanic islands are separated by a three-km-wide channel, called The Narrows. On the southern tip of long, baseball bat-shaped Saint Kitts lies the Great Salt Pond; Nevis Peak sits in the center of its almost circular namesake island and its ball shape complements that of its sister island.

St. Kitts became Britain's first colony in the West Indies with the founding of a settlement in 1623. The islands became an associated state with full internal autonomy in 1967. The island of Anguilla rebelled and was allowed to secede in 1971. In 1983, the Federation of St. Kitts & Nevis gained independence as a two-island nation within the British Commonwealth. In 1998, a vote in Nevis on a referendum to separate from Saint Kitts fell short of the two-thirds majority needed. Today, St. Kitts & Nevis is developing a distinct style and culture, although, not surprisingly, British influence is still strongly evidenced in many traditions. In terms of ethnic groups, the population is predominantly black with some British, Portuguese and Lebanese components.

The government style is a constitutional monarchy with a Westminster-style parliament. The capital city is Basseterre; there are fourteen parishes. Queen Elizabeth II is the Chief of State; she is represented by a Governor General. The head of government is a Prime Minister, and there is a Deputy Prime Minister. The monarch is hereditary; the governor general is appointed by the monarch; following legislative elections, the leader of the majority party or leader of a majority coalition is usually appointed prime minister by the governor general; the deputy prime minister appointed by the governor general. The Cabinet is appointed by the governor general in consultation with the prime minister. There is a unicameral National Assembly (14 seats, 3 appointed and 11 popularly elected from single-member constituencies; members serve five-year terms).

The economy of Saint Kitts and Nevis is heavily dependent upon tourism revenues, which has replaced sugar, the traditional mainstay of the economy until the 1970s. Following the 2005



harvest, the government closed the sugar industry after decades of losses of 3-4 percent of GDP annually. To compensate for employment losses, the government has embarked on a program to diversify the agricultural sector and to stimulate other sectors of the economy, such as tourism, export-oriented manufacturing, and offshore banking. Economic growth was above average for Latin America from 2004 to 2006, but has since slowed. Like other tourist destinations in the Caribbean, the St. Kitts and Nevis is vulnerable to damage from natural disasters and shifts in tourism demand. The current government is constrained by a high public debt burden equivalent to nearly 185 percent of GDP by the end of 2006, largely attributable to public enterprise losses.

Current Religious Situation

The 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.

Christianity is the dominant religion. An estimated 50 percent of the population adheres to the Anglican Church, and 25 percent are Roman Catholics. The remainder of the population includes a variety of Christian and other religious groups, including African-derived religions.

There are two Catholic schools and a Seventh-day Adventist school. Although the Government does not contribute financially to these schools, it does require all schools to conduct morning Christian prayers and hymns.

Social and Political Development

The islands of St. Kitts-Nevis were originally settled by the Carib people who were first visited by Christopher Columbus in 1493. The islands' history is long and bloody. The French and English settled here early in the 1600s and subsequently fought with, and then annihilated, the local Carib people.

The Caribs were left alone until Thomas Walker established the first English settlement in the Caribbean in 1623. The initial settlement on nearby Nevis was accomplished in 1628. After the Caribs were eliminated, slaves from Africa were imported to work as laborers on the expanding sugar plantations. For the next century, France and England vied for control of the islands, but they were awarded to England by the Treaty of Versailles of 1793.

During the following years, the islands and their vastly valuable sugar trade were an important pawn in the European struggle for supremacy of the seas and the new world. England ultimately won out over France (and then Spain). These islands play important parts in the new world events during that period: at the height of their power, Nevis was considered "the richest jewel" of the Caribbean and St. Kitts was known as the Mother Colony and "cradle" of the Caribbean.

In 1816, St. Kitts was included in a single colony that included the Virgin Islands and Anguilla. The Virgin Islands were separated in 1871, and St. Kitts became the center of the remaining colony. After World War II, it was incorporated into the Associate States of the West Indies and developed local autonomy. Anguilla moved to disassociate itself in 1980. Religious freedom is guaranteed in St. Kitts-Nevis.

Today's population is mostly descended from African slaves brought to the island to work sugar and tobacco crops, and indentured servants and small farmers who stayed on after the world drop in sugar prices in the mid-1800s, which made plantation farming less than lucrative.

Religious Development

The **Church of England (Anglican Church)** arrived with the first British settlers and for more than a hundred years was the only religious organization on the islands. In 1824 the bishop of London handed over control of the parishes to the bishop on Barbados. That same year an archdeaconry of Antigua, which included St. Kitts-Nevis, was established. The archdeaconry became a diocese in 1842 and has since become a diocese of the **Church of the Province of the West Indies**, headquartered at Nassau, the Bahamas.

Daniel Gottwald and James Birkly, missionaries of the **Moravian Church**, arrived in 1777 to establish the first Protestant mission. They had been invited by John Gardiner, a planter, to evangelize the slaves under his care. They and their successors were soon visiting more than fifty plantations. The following churches were established: Zion (1777), Bethesda (1819), Bethel (1832) and Estridge (1839).

When the **Methodists** arrived in 1787, the two churches cooperated in evangelistic efforts and the building of churches. Methodism was introduced to St. Kitts by Lydia Seaton, formerly a servant who had been converted by Nathaniel Gilbert while living on Antigua. The Rev. Thomas Coke, the associate of Methodist founder John Wesley, visited St. Kitts for the first time in 1787 and later sent Thomas Hammett there to head the work. The Methodists later affiliated with the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas and the Moravian work assigned to the Moravian Church in Jamaica. Both churches are now members of the World Council of Churches.

The **Roman Catholic Church** established work in 1861. It was included in the diocese of Roseau (Dominica) until 1971 and then was placed in the Diocese of St. John's (Antigua).

During the twentieth century, a variety of **Protestant denominations** arrived in St. Kitts-Nevis to begin missionary activity, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Pilgrim Holiness Church (merged with the Wesleyan Church in 1968), the Church of God of Prophecy, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), the Christian Brethren, the Churches of Christ, and the Salvation Army. At the same time a number of national churches have been established, such as the Antioch Baptist Church, the Assemblies of the First Born, and the Evangelical Faith Church.

The St. Kitts Christian Council, which includes Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and other traditional Christian religious groups, conducts activities to promote greater mutual understanding and respect among adherents of different Christian traditions. **The Evangelical Association** unites 11 churches in the evangelical community and promotes their interests.

Marginal Christian groups include Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Other Religions

The following Afro-Caribbean religions are present, the oldest of which are **Myalism and Obeah**. These are reportedly practiced in secret by some Trinidadians, especially those who are not active members of Christian churches. Myalism is an African-derived belief system that developed among blacks in the West Indies during the slavery period; Obeah is the specific practice of "black magic" or witchcraft by priests, known as "obeahmen."

The **Spiritual Baptist Movement** emerged during the early 19th century in the **British West Indies** and exists today in Barbados, Grenada, St. Kitts, St. Vincent, Trinidad-Tobago and other Caribbean-basin countries (Guyana and Venezuela), as well as in North America and

Europe (New York City, Los Angeles, Toronto and London). Spiritual Baptist membership is predominantly black, with Asians and Whites comprising less than five percent of the total adherents, according to Stephen Glazier (2001: 315-319). The largest Spiritual Baptist churches are reported to be outside the Caribbean among West Indians migrants to Canada, the USA and Europe.

The **Rastafarians** have their roots in the “back to Africa” nativistic movement in Jamaica during the 1920s and 1930s. Rastafarians complained of discrimination, especially in hiring and in schools.

There is little evidence of new organized religions apart from Christianity, but the following groups are present: the Baha’i Faith and Islam. There is no organized Jewish community, although there is a Jewish cemetery on Nevis.

Hindus make up 1.5 percent of the total population of St.Kitts-Nevis according to the 2000 census. This totals to 600 people.

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