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

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# Religion in St. Vincent and the Grenadines

## Country Summary

Saint Vincent, one of the Windward Islands, is located on the southeastern edge of the Caribbean Sea between St. Lucia and Grenada, and about 100 miles west of Barbados. Since being granted independence as a member of the British Commonwealth in 1979, its territory of 150 square miles has included not only the main island of St. Vincent (133 sq mi) but also the northern part of the Grenadine Islands (17 sq mi), located immediately to the south. The Grenadines are a chain of small islands stretching south from Saint Vincent to Grenada. Thirty-two of the Grenadines are part of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, while the rest belong to Grenada.

St. Vincent is a volcanic island whose highest point is La Soufrière, an active volcano. The volcano's last major eruption was in 1979. La Soufrière, with an elevation of 4,048 feet, is at the northern end of a mountain range that runs southward to Mount St. Andrew. The mountains are heavily forested, with numerous streams fed by heavy rainfall. There is a reservation for the native Carib people at Sandy Bay in the northern part of St. Vincent. The island of Bequia, the largest of the Grenadines, could only be reached by sea until the construction of an airport there in 1992.

Administratively, the nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is divided into six parishes with a combined population of about 103,000 (2013). Five are on Saint Vincent (Charlotte, Saint Andrew, Saint David, Saint George and Saint Patrick) and the sixth is the Grenadines (population 8,000). Kingstown is located in the Parish of St. George and is the capital city and central administrative center of the nation. Charlotte is the largest parish.

The government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy within the British Commonwealth of Nations with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. The Queen is represented in the country by the Governor General of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, currently Sir Frederick Ballantyne. The office of Governor General has mostly ceremonial functions including the opening of the islands' House of Assembly and the appointment of various government officials. Control of the government rests with the elected Prime Minister and his or her cabinet. There is a parliamentary opposition made of the largest minority stakeholder in general elections, headed by the leader of the opposition. The current Prime Minister is the Honourable Dr. Ralph Gonsalves.



The country has no formal armed forces, although the Royal Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force includes a Special Service Unit.

The official language is English but most Vincentians also speak a dialect called Vincentian Creole. English is used in education, government, religion and other formal domains, while Creole is used in informal conversations such as in the home and among friends.

The ethnic composition is about 66 percent African descent, 19 percent of mixed descent, 6 percent East Indian, 4 percent Europeans (mainly Portuguese descent), 2 percent Carib Amerindian and 3 percent others. Most Vincentians are descendants of Africans brought to the island to work on plantations. Other ethnic groups, such as Portuguese (from Madeira) and East Indians, were contracted to work on plantations after the abolition of slavery by the British, and there are also Syrians living on the island. There is also a growing Chinese population and a sizable minority of mixed race. St. Vincent has a high rate of emigration. With extremely high unemployment and underemployment, continued population growth remains a major problem.

Agriculture is dominated by banana production, which is the most important sector of this lower-middle-income economy. The services sector, based mainly on a growing tourist industry, is also important. The continuing dependence on a single crop represents the largest obstacle to the islands' development. Tropical storms wiped out large portions of crops in both 1994 and 1995.

The tourism sector has considerable potential for development over the next decade. The filming of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies on the island has also helped to increase tourism and expose the country to the wider world. Recent growth has been stimulated by strong activity in the construction sector and an improvement in tourism.

A further boost is expected to be provided by the new international airport which is currently under construction. There is a small manufacturing sector and a small offshore financial sector whose particularly restrictive secrecy laws have caused some international concern.

## **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. According to the 2001 census, the Anglican Church (18 percent) and Pentecostals (18 percent) are the largest religious groups, followed by Methodists (11 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (10 percent), Baptists (10 percent), and Roman Catholics (7 percent). Other religious groups include small communities of Spiritual Baptists, Baha'is, Hindus and Muslims. There is also a sizable Rastafarian minority. Intermixed with the above formal religious groups are worshipers of Orisha (Yoruban religion: variants of Santería and Vodou) and followers of Myalism-Obeah.

## **Overview of Historical, Social and Political Development**

The island now known as Saint Vincent was originally named "Hairouna" by the Carib Indians. Carib Indians aggressively prevented European settlement on St. Vincent until the 18th century. At that time, formerly enslaved Africans, who had either been shipwrecked or who had escaped from Barbados, St. Lucia and Grenada and sought refuge in mainland St. Vincent, intermarried with the Caribs and became known as Garifuna or *Black Caribs*. Beginning in 1719, French

settlers gained control of the island and began cultivating coffee, tobacco, indigo, cotton, and sugar on plantations. These plantations were worked by enslaved Africans. In 1763, France ceded control of St. Vincent to Britain. However, France re-invaded the island in 1779. The French regained control after landing at Calliaqua, near Fort Duvernette. The British then finally regained St. Vincent under the Treaties of Versailles (1783). These treaties were ancillary treaties to the Treaty of Paris (1783), through which Great Britain officially recognized the end of the American Revolution.

Between 1783 and 1796, there was conflict between the British and the Black Caribs, who were led by defiant Paramount Chief Joseph Chatoyer. In 1796, British General Sir Ralph Abercromby put an end to the open conflict by crushing a revolt that had been fomented by the French radical Victor Hugues. More than 5,000 Black Caribs were eventually deported to Roatán, an island off the northern coast of Honduras.

Slavery was abolished in St. Vincent in 1834. An apprenticeship period followed which ended in 1838. After its end, labor shortages on the plantations resulted, and this was initially addressed by the immigration of indentured servants. In the late 1840s many Portuguese immigrants arrived from the island of Madeira (located in the mid-Atlantic Ocean about 360 miles west of the African coast), and between 1861 and 1888 shiploads of East Indian (Hindu) laborers arrived. Conditions remained harsh for both former slaves and immigrant agricultural workers, as depressed world sugar prices kept the economy stagnant until the turn of the century.

From 1763 until its independence in 1979, St. Vincent passed through various stages of colonial status under the British. A representative assembly was authorized in 1776, Crown Colony government was established in 1877, a legislative council was created in 1925, and universal adult suffrage was granted in 1951.

During the period of its control of St. Vincent, the British made several unsuccessful attempts to affiliate the island with other Windward Islands. This would have simplified Britain's control over the region through a unified administration. In the 1960s, several regional islands under British control, including St. Vincent, also made an independent attempt to unify. The unification was to be called the West Indies Federation and was driven by a desire to gain freedom from British rule. The attempt collapsed in 1962.

St. Vincent was granted "associate statehood" status by Britain on 27 October 1969. This gave St. Vincent complete control over its internal affairs but was short of full independence. On 27 October 1979, following a referendum under Milton Cato, St. Vincent and the Grenadines became the last of the Windward Islands to gain their independence, which came on the 10th anniversary of St. Vincent's associate statehood status.

Natural disasters have featured prominently in the country's history. In 1902, La Soufrière volcano erupted, killing 2,000 people. Much farmland was damaged and the economy deteriorated. In April 1979, La Soufrière erupted again. Although no one was killed, thousands had to be evacuated, and again there was extensive agricultural damage. In 1980 and 1987 hurricanes compromised banana and coconut plantations. The years 1998 and 1999 also had very active hurricane seasons, with Hurricane Lenny in 1999 causing extensive damage to the west coast of the island.

In November 2009 the country rejected the referendum on whether or not to become a Republic: 67 percent was needed to end Queen Elizabeth II's reign as the country's Head of State, but 55 percent supported with the Monarchy. A celebration was then held in the country, where over 10,000 people attended a party in the capital of Kingstown.

## Overview of Religious Development

The **Church of England (also known as The Anglican Church)** came to St. Vincent with the first British settlers in the 1780s. It has remained the largest religious denomination on St. Vincent, and its largely Afro-Caribbean membership reflects the island's population. Today, the Diocese of the Windward Islands, within the *Church of the Province of the West Indies*, is headquartered on St. Vincent.

**Methodism** spread through the Caribbean from England in the years immediately after the American Revolution of 1775-1783. It reached St. Vincent in 1787, a direct result of the Rev. Thomas Coke's visit to Antigua and the birth of his enthusiasm for missionizing Britain's Caribbean colonies in 1786. The Methodist work in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is now a part of the **Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas**.

Through the course of the 20th century, a variety of **Protestant Free Church bodies** arrived in St. Vincent-Grenadines from both England and North America. These include Baptist, Holiness, Adventist, Pentecostal and independent evangelical bodies. The mission of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada has grown to become the *Pentecostal Church of the West Indies*. Among the more interesting bodies is the *Christian Pilgrim Church of St. Vincent*, which is a national Christian denomination.

By 2000, the following Protestant denominations were present:

- The Anglican Church (1780s)
- The Methodist Church (1787)
- Seventh-day Adventist Church (1903)
- Baptist-Mid Missions (1946)
- Evangelical Church of the West Indies (1951, West Indies Mission, now WorldTeam)
- Bible Missionary Church (1960)
- Church of the Nazarene (arrived in 1975)
- Baptist Convention of St. Vincent (1977, affiliated with Southern Baptist Convention)
- Baptist International Missions
- Macedonia World Baptist Mission
- Independent Baptist churches
- Wesleyan Holiness Church
- The Salvation Army
- Christian Brethren (Gospel Halls)
- Christian Pilgrim Church of St. Vincent
- Bible Missionary Church
- Church of God General Conference
- Church of God Seventh Day (Jerusalem)
- Worldwide Church of God (now Grace Communion International)
- New Testament Church of God-Church of God (Cleveland, TN)
- Church of God of Prophecy

- Open Bible Standard Churches
- Pentecostal Association of the West Indies (founded by Canadian Pentecostals)
- Churches of Christ (related to Pepperdine group and Harding College in Searcy, AR)
- Ambassadors for Christ in the West Indies

Both the Christian Council of Churches (CCC) and Association of Evangelical Churches (AEC) conducted activities to promote greater mutual understanding and respect among the various denominations. In 1964, the Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists and The Salvation Army founded the Christian Council of Churches of St. Vincent, now known as the Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Christian Council. It is closely related to the World Council of Churches.

There was an estimated population of 8,000 **Roman Catholics** in 2008.

## **Other Religions**

**Marginal Christian groups** include the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Shakers or Spiritual Baptists (since the 1860s).

The early slave trade transplanted **African spirituality** upon the shores of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century a new religion thrived that was rooted both in African animistic traditions and Protestant Christianity. This religion, characterized by intense displays of ecstatic expression (called "spirit possession"), became known as **Shakers or Spiritual Baptists** (also known as "Tie-heads"). The syncretistic movement spread through many of the Caribbean Islands during the mid-to-late 1800s and was banned on St. Vincent between 1913 and 1965, due to its unique beliefs and practices. This religious tradition was made illegal by the Shakerism Prohibition Ordinance, which made it illegal for the Shakers to worship anywhere at anytime. During 1949 and 1950 there were official reports of persecution against the Shakers under this law. Despite constant persecution, the Shakers thrived and today they comprise a vibrant community of spiritual practitioners. Prayer houses or "praise houses" (which usually hold between 50 and 70 people) are scattered throughout the islands where meetings, often lasting four or five hours, are regularly held under the leadership of church elders (both men and women).

Water baptism and mourning are two the Shakers most important rituals. No one is baptized until they first have a dream, vision or spiritual sign. Once baptized, the initiate (called a "pilgrim") is eligible for participation in their most sacred ritual, which is called "mourning," "taking a spiritual journey," a "pilgrim journey" or "going to the secret room." There the initiate seeks a vision through prayer and fasting, which typically lasts between six and 21 days.

Before beginning one's "spiritual journey," several layers of cloth bands with wax markings are tied tightly around the pilgrim's head and eyes by an assistant, known as "a pointer." The cloth bands are triangles or squares of cotton fabric and a sacred message or symbol is written on it with wax or chalk. Before being tied around the pilgrim's head, the bands are blessed by an elder. Different color bands have special meanings: red may indicate the blood and love of Jesus, white may represent purity, blue for healing, yellow for spirituality, and brown for positivity. The use of these cloth bands has led to the identification of Shakers as "Tie-Heads."

In the visions, Shakers find spiritual instruction and knowledge, which ranges from metaphysics to the practice of physical healing. This learning experience from the unseen

spiritual world is sometimes called “going to school.” This is the core experience for the Shakers.

During regular worship services, Shakers participate in long chanted prayers, sing hymns and receive exhortation from an elder who preaches to the congregation. Participants clap and sing and dance, and several may be “touched by the Holy Spirit.” Phase one is called “connecting with the spirit,” and it is expressed by spontaneous jerks, shivering, trembling, unexpected shouts, sobs, hisses and unintelligible sounds (called “speaking in tongues”). The pilgrim’s body begins to feel “out of control; body movement and sounds appear to be random and unpatterned. Phase two is called “moving when the spirit adopts you,” and is expressed by profuse sweating with repetitive, rhythmic movements, with the body bending forward from the waist with knees slightly bent, typically with strong breathing sounds. This is the deepest stage of ecstatic spiritual experience (“spirit possession”) with body movements and sounds now rhythmical, patterned and often in sync with the group. Phase three is called “separating from the spirit,” which is characterized by singing or humming, gasps, groans, sighs, shouts, often with a shortness of breath. This is a time of bewilderment and confusion when the pilgrim begins to disengage from feeling overtaken by the spirit (Keeney 2002:20-25).

**The Spiritual Baptist Movement** also exists in Barbados, Grenada, 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.

It should be noted that Spiritual Baptists condemn Orisha rites as “heathen worship,” because Orisha rites are directed toward African-derived deities, whereas Spiritual Baptist rites are directed to their version of the Holy Trinity of Protestant Christianity. Although the Spiritual Baptists and Orisha are clearly separate traditions, they are also interrelated on a number of levels.

**Yoruban religion** (Orisha worship), popularly called Santería in Cuba and Puerto Rico or Vodou in Haiti and other French-speaking Caribbean lands, emerged in the Spanish and French Caribbean regions among the descendants of black slaves whose African deities became identified with Roman Catholic saints (syncretism). Orisha worship operates as a semisecret religion in private homes, and the estimate of the number of its adherents is difficult to determine.

The folklore of St. Vincent and the Grenadines reflects its combined English, African and French heritage. Some Vincentians still fear the African-derived black magic called *Obeah*, with is related to *Myalism*. In Jamaica and other British colonies of the Caribbean, two similar and complementary belief systems emerged on the plantations among African slaves: **Obeah and Myalism**. Many of the slaves were from the Ashanti-Fanti and Ibo peoples of West Africa, who continued to practice their own brands of African animism. The “obeah-man” is a private practitioner (sorcerer, witch or wizard), who uses “black magic” to cast spells and do harm to people, whereas the “myal-man” is a spiritual leader (medium, shaman and folk healer) of a cult group devoted to organized religious life (myalism), who uses “white magic” for spirit mediation, healing and problem-solving.

**Big Drum or Nation Dance Ceremony** is popular in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and throughout the Windward Islands. Reflecting an African heritage, this music combines the African “call-and-response” with features of calypso and reggae. The Big Drum is actually a set of three drums. They were originally carved from trees, but are now commonly made from rum

kegs. The singers are usually women; the lead singer is called a "chantwell." The songs feature satire and social commentary. Dances are performed by dancers wearing full skirts and headdresses. According to Patrick Taylor (2001:2):

...Nation Dance is an Eastern Caribbean ancestral ceremony in which a community of people pay their respects to their ancestors and retrieve from them the knowledge of the past that will sustain the present and future: the Nation Dance is an ancestral redemption of the present for the salvation of the future.

In 2001, **Rastafarians** numbered approximately 1,500 persons in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The Rastafarian movement emerged in Jamaica during the 1920s and 1930s, where they formed isolated compounds in the hills and recreated village life from their ancient African homeland; they became known for their dreadlocks (hair styled to resemble a lion's mane), their use of marijuana (or *ganja*, as they called it), and their liberation-oriented music (reggae), which has transcended their Jamaican-based movement to become popular internationally. There are three main sects or orders of Rastafari today: the Nyahbinghi Order, Bobo Ashanti and the Twelve Tribes of Israel. All agree on the basic principles of the divine status of Haile Selassie and the importance of black images of divinity. Many Rastafari do not belong to any sect and the movement as a whole is loosely defined and organized.

**Hinduism and Islam** arrived with the Asian Indian contract laborers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 2000 census reported 3,700 Hindus in St. Vincent-Grenadines, which was 3.3 percent of the total population. Adherents to **Transcendental Meditation (TM)**, a Hindu-related group, are also present.

The **Baha'i Faith** has spread on St. Vincent in the years since World War II, as have a few other religious traditions.

**Freemasonry:** The District Grand Lodge of Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean, under the auspices of the United Grand Lodge of England, consists of eighteen (18) Masonic Lodges from St. Thomas, U S Virgin Island in the north, to Grenada in the south; with an approximate total membership of 1,000. The centenary celebration for St. George Lodge 2616 (founded in 1896) on St. Vincent was held in 1996.

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