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(77) CHRISTIANITY IN MAURITIUS

James Rodney Curpanen

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	408,000	32.7%	434,000	33.3%	0.4%
Independents	15,600	1.2%	24,000	1.8%	2.9%
African initiated	9,700	0.8%			
Protestants	126,000	10.1%	125,000	9.6%	-0.1%
Pentecostal	111,000	8.9%			
Roman Catholics	284,000	22.7%	290,000	22.2%	0.1%
Pentecostals/Charismatics	292,000	23.4%	340,000	26.1%	1.0%
Evangelicals	115,000	9.2%	125,000	9.6%	0.6%
Hindus	561,000	45.0%	548,000	42.0%	-0.2%
Muslims	207,000	16.6%	214,000	16.4%	0.2%
Baha'is	22,500	1.8%	35,000	2.7%	3.0%
Chinese folk-religionists	16,400	1.3%	19,000	1.5%	1.0%
Buddhists	3,100	0.2%	3,500	0.3%	0.9%
Sikhs	2,700	0.2%	3,400	0.3%	1.5%
adherents of traditional African religions	2,500	0.2%	2,800	0.2%	0.9%
adherents of new religious movements	700	0.1%	850	0.1%	1.3%
people professing no religion	23,300	1.9%	42,500	3.3%	4.1%
Total population	**1,248,000**	**100.0%**	**1,304,000**	**100.0%**	**0.3%**

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Introduction

It is commonly believed that the first Christian service held on the island of Mauritius may have been of Reformed tradition when the Dutch first landed in September 1598 to take possession. The Dutch named the island after one of its Princes, Maurice de Nassau. The Dutch never really settled on the island. In March 1616, the first Roman Catholic mass was celebrated by a priest on his way to Madagascar.[1] The next Catholic visit, followed by a permanent presence, would be in October 1721. This was also the era of French rule. A prominent historical figure of the church is Father Jacques Désiré Laval who concentrated his work among former slaves.[2] Mgr Jean Margeot became the first Mauritian RC bishop in 1969 and cardinal in 1988.

[1] Breejan Burrun. *Histoire Des Religions Des Iles Maurice et Rodrigues*. Vacoas: Editions Le Printemps Ltée (2002): 11

[2] Benjamin Moutou. *Les Chrétiens de l'ile Maurice*. Port Louis: Best Graphics (1996): 256-258

The British captured the island in 1810. From then on, other churches established themselves, beginning with the Anglicans. The Rev. H. Shepherd served as the chaplain. In 1825, the first assembly met in an old gunpowder mill, which later became St James Cathedral, inaugurated in 1850 by the Catholic Bishop of Colombo, Mgr James Chapman.[3] The Diocese of Mauritius was created in 1854.

The Spread of Christianity

The Rev. John Le Brun arrived as a London Missionary Society envoy in May 1814. He started the Evangelical Independent Church in 1818. He worked mainly amongst the coloured population by opening schools in various places over the island and became known as the 'Apostle of free education'. The church's first church building was St John's in Port Louis, inaugurated in 1851.[4] The Reformed presence was reinforced in 1851 by the Church of Scotland. Their first pastor was the Rev. Patrick Beaton. In 1876, there was a fusion of the Evangelical Independent Church and the Church of Scotland which fell under Scotland until it became the Presbyterian Church of Mauritius, constituted by an act of parliament in 1979.

The Swedenborg (New Jerusalem) church arrived in 1846. The Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) organized themselves as a church in September 1914 under the leadership of Pastor Paul Badaut from France.[5] The Chinese Christian Assembly, which met from 1953 in the Presbyterian church of Rose Hill, then later on in Port Louis, became the Chinese Christian Fellowship in 1981. Early efforts of the 1930s and 1940s gave birth to several evangelical churches established officially in the late 1970s. In 1967, Pastor Aimé Cizeron from the Assembly of God (AOG) in France launched the local branch, commonly known as Mission Salut et Guérison. Several dissident churches are offshoots of the AOG, such as La Voix de la Délivrance, Eglise de Pentecôte Unie, and le Centre Evangélique Charismatique, for example. Others, such as the Christian Charismatic Church or the Christian Revival Centre, started independently. L'Eglise Chrétienne was born following charismatic renewal within the Roman Catholic Church, and constituted itself as a church in 1977.[6]

Early collaboration between the churches was in the form of an auxiliary of the British & Foreign Bible Society under the presidency of the British governor Robert Townsend Farquhar. Most collaborative efforts fell within the twentieth century. The Presbyterians and Anglicans included the Roman Catholics to form an Ecumenical Working Group. After thirty-five years, it opened up to include the Assemblies of God and the Fellowship of Christian Churches (FCCM). Prison Fellowship Mauritius has a wider co-operation. In the 1980s, Christians rather than churches created faith-based organizations such as Youth For Christ, YMCA, Gideon's, Child Evangelism Fellowship and Scripture Union. Membership increased rapidly to include Campus Crusade, IFES, YWAM, the Haggai Institute and numerous others.

At the end of the twentieth and early 21st centuries, more recently established churches began to form associations. FCCM started in the 1990s. To avoid the term 'denomination', several churches formed a Federation of Evangelical Churches. Similarly, Pentecostals created the Federation of Pentecostal Protestant Churches, the Baptists also have formed a federation and it seems the trend will continue.

The Roman Catholic, Anglican and SDA have maintained a strong presence in the formal educational field. From its rich heritage, the Presbyterians are left with a pre-primary school in the village of Pointe aux Piments. However, recently a couple of schools have been opened by independent Evangelicals. Several

[3] Ghislain Emmanuel. *A History of the Anglican Diocese of Mauritius (1810-19730 with an addendum (1973-2000).* Rose Hill: Edition de l'Océan Indien (2014): 5-32.
[4] L. Rivaltz Quenette, *L'Oeuvre du Révérend Jean Le Brun à l'ile Maurice* (Moka: Institut Mahatma Gandhi, [1982] 2014).
[5] Breejan Burrun, *1914-2014: 100 ans de L'Eglise Adventiste à Maurice* Vol 1. (Rose Hill: Cube Printing Ltée, 2014), 51.
[6] Burrun, *Histoire Religion*, 29-47.

churches run educational and literacy programmes that complement formal schooling in their community neighbourhoods or in poverty-stricken areas.

Training for clergy is a concern of all denominations. Since 1987, the Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches have jointly dispensed biblical and theological TEE-style training through Formation Biblique et Théologique. The Mauritius Bible Institute, in partnership with Vose Seminary Australia, is run by the evangelicals. All the churches depend heavily on overseas training.

During the years 2000 to 2008, with the support of Southern African Churches in Ministry with Uprooted (SACMUP), the Presbyterians took up the concerns of the displaced population from the islands of Chagos and Diego Garcia. Today, the Protestant Evangelical Church (PEC) continues this mission. The Roman Catholics, Presbyterians and PEC have solid ministries of alleviating poverty and working with the homeless. Several Baptist and Pentecostal churches now also move into these fields of service. Youth for Christ worked for many years with drug addicts and alcoholics within an island-wide network that included Hindu and Muslim groups. Ministry against domestic violence had a few proponents earlier on (among the RCs and Presbyterian), but today includes many religious groups and associations driven by a government programme. The evangelicals and Pentecostals are still diffidently considering their roles in this area.

A major challenge facing Mauritian Christians this century is obviously an ecumenism that would include as many denominations as possible. There have been hesitant attempts to set up fellowships, all short-lived. Division occurs across doctrinal lines, but also with regard to social involvement, national or worldwide issues such as HIV and AIDS, or the pastoral role of women. For a population of 1.3 million, having more than a hundred separate churches and denominations calls for deep reflection. Another great challenge is how to relate to other religions, while still maintaining the mission to evangelise. Only the Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians form part of the Council of Religion constituted in 2001, and which includes Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Baha'is. Together with the University of Mauritius, this Council runs a certificate programme on Inter-Faith and Peace.

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