Reunion Island

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Reunion Island is located in the south-western part of the Indian Ocean, at approximately 800 kilometers from the east coast of the island of Madagascar. This isle, together with Mauritius and Rodrigues islands, constitute the Mascarene archipelago. Unlike the other two islands, Reunion is currently an overseas department-region of France. It is thus an integrant part of the French territory and, by extension, of the European Union.

**Vital Statistics**

Reunion Island is a small volcanic isle comprising 2,512 square kilometers of land and 207 kilometers of its periphery. Its population in 2020 estimated at 860,000. The administrative capital city is Saint-Denis. Reunion Island constitutes a part of the Indian Ocean Union Conference (IOUC) of Seventh-day Adventists, within the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division (SID). In 2019, there were 17 Adventist churches and 1,288 members in Reunion Island.

**Historical Background**

**Discovery**

The discovery of Reunion Island was not unlike that of those of other islands in this part of the Indian Ocean. The first people to step on its shores were the European navigators. Historical consensus attributes the first discovery of the island to the Portuguese navigator, Pedro Mascarenhas, at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, previous stops on the island by the Arabs and other eastern mariners can hardly be denied.

Reunion Island has had several names attached to it in its history. The earliest one is found in the Cantino planisphere from 1502. It identifies the island under the name Dina Margabin. The second attested name of the island is Santa Apollonia as early as 1518. In 1640, the territory was officially annexed by the French king Louis XIII. It was renamed Bourbon Isle. In 1848 France gave to the territory its definitive name: La Réunion.

**Development**

The proper colonization of this island started with the creation of the French East India Company in 1664 that recognized the strategic position of Bourbon. It was, indeed, a good stopover spot for the ships *en route* to India. The economy of the island began to flourish in the eighteenth century. The primary produce centered around spices (especially cloves and nutmeg), but soon came the golden age of coffee, dominating the economy from 1725 to 1742. Around 1789, the cultivation of sugar cane took over. Today, it is still the main agricultural produce of Reunion.

Due to the growing demand for workers, the eighteenth century saw a significant upsurge of the slave trade. Slaves were imported from Africa and Madagascar and brought to the plantations controlled by French colonies. In less than a century the slave population of Reunion went from around 300 to 23,000.

On December 20, 1848, slavery was abolished in the island. This event is considered by the islanders, until today, as being the most important one in the history of the Reunion. It remains a commemoration day, highlighting the culture inherited from the slaves.

The colony was then integrated into France and officially became an overseas department in March 1946. This status was revised in 2003 when the island became an overseas department-region. The island was included in the European Union in 1992. In 1997, Reunion obtained the status of ultra-peripheral regions of Europe.

**Cultural Background**

**Ethnicity**

The ethnical diversity is an important trait of Reunion Island. It is an inheritance of its history and is preserved in its name – Reunion. The main origins of this diversity are the slave trade and the recruitment of indentured Asian workers. At the beginning of the settlement, the primary dominant group was the French colonizers. Slaves were soon imported, mostly from Africa. A considerable number were brought from Madagascar, but also from the Swahili coast and Mozambique. Beside Africa, slaves were also imported from India, Arabia and South-Eastern China. Many were illegally transported from the Indonesian archipelago. In the nineteenth century, mainly because of the abolition of slavery, the Island started recruiting indentured workers, mostly from India.

Today, the population is embodied into several subcultures:

Yab or petit blanc: Christian descendants of the first white French people who arrived in Reunion three centuries ago;

Kaf: Afro-Malagasy and Christian descendants of slaves;

Cre´ole or Me´tis: mainly mixed race and Christian;

Malbar or Tamil: Tamil Hindu and mostly Christian;
Zarab: Muslim from Gujarat;

Chinois: mostly Buddhist and Christian;

Zoreÿ: metropolitan and Christian;

Gros blanc: rich Christian, landowners, ex-slave masters;

Malgaches: emigrants from Madagascar and animists;

Komor: Muslim emigrants from Comoro and Mayotte islands.

Religion

Reunion Island's ethnic melting pot has indubitably induced a religious pluralism. In Reunion, Christians, Moslems, Hindus, Animists, and Atheists are cohabiting. Until today, Catholicism remains the majority’s religion. Catholicism was the only organized religion of Reunion Island until 1936. That year, the first Adventist missionary arrived. The Adventist church was the first protestant denomination to enter Reunion. It remained the only one for about three decades. It seems that, during this long period, several Protestant missions have tried to penetrate the island but failed because of the strong opposition of the catholic church.

In 1962, the decisions of the Vatican II council produced important changes in the religious situation of the isle. The council allowed traditional cultures to be mixed with Christianism. It was the beginning of a religious syncretism which is still practiced today. Thus, in Reunion, it is not uncommon to encounter people being "at the same time Christian and Hindu, Christian and animist, or Hindu and animist."

In 1966, the evangelical pioneer Aimé Cizeron introduced the Assembly of God Church. He had immediate success.

Seventh-day Adventism in Reunion Island

In its early Adventist history, Reunion territory was part of the Mauritius Mission field. The first recorded missionary in Reunion was the settlement of a Mauritian Adventist family in 1931. It was only a few years later that the mission gained momentum. In 1936, in a concern for the mission work in the south Indian Ocean islands, the Madagascar-Mascarene Union Mission was raised. It is during this year that the first official Adventist missionary Paul Girard set foot on Reunion Island. He was accompanied by his wife and his child. Before Girard arrival, no evangelical mission had ever been established on the Island. Catholicism was hegemonic. He wrote in a publication of July 1936: “While Rome is strongly entrenched here and presents a Gilbraltar of obstacles, yet with the help of God, His cause will triumph among the people of this beautiful island.” During that same year, the Reunion Island Mission was established. The first Sabbath keepers were reported and a financial appeal was made for the building the first Adventist chapel. Girard remained the superintendent of Reunion Mission for more than ten years. He served from 1936 to 1948.

In 1937, the first Adventist chapel was built in Reunion Island. The first baptism occurred within the same year. At the end of that year, the church counted nine members. During the following years, membership growth was steady but slow. In the year 1938, the church gained two members. The situation improved in 1939, with the coming of a new missionary family. A great revival occurred in 1945 when a third church was built and the membership almost doubled. The following year, two new ordained ministers began their work. There were now three ministers on the Island. The growth continued, as five years later in 1950, Reunion Mission counted six churches and its membership a quintupled by the end of 1944.

Adventist Institutions

Dispensary. The medical ministry was the first to emerge in Reunion. It started in 1948 with Mrs. Sylvain Meyer, the wife of the mission director at that time. She was a trained nurse from La Ligniere Sanitarium on Lake Geneva. In 1948, a children’s dispensary was officially opened under her supervision. It was a modest but useful establishment. Sylvain Meyer writes in 1950: “The physical misery is immense, but already the care, advice, and prayers have borne good fruit. Tracts, magazines, and Bibles have been distributed.” In 1950, a project for the opening of a new dispensary was made. The children’s dispensary closed in 1955. Today, there is no Adventist medical institutions in Reunion.
Adventist Schools. The education department opened in Reunion in 1949 under the supervision of Mrs. R. Vertallier. However, in 1960, no educational work was already started yet. The situation at that time was difficult for Adventist children. The public schools were lacking teachers and rooms. In 1963, the mission planned to open a primary school in Saint-Denis and another was scheduled in the south. Unfortunately, the plans did not materialize. In 1972, no educational institution had been opened yet. A high school was finally opened in the south of the island in the 1990s but it was closed few years later.

Since 2019, the church has been working on opening an Adventist high school and finding a solution for Adventist teenagers who are encountering difficulties in finding institutions which will not require them to work on the Sabbath.

Adventist Media Center. The radio work in Reunion started in 1951. It was broadcasting religious and educational programs. The religious program was “La voix de l’espoir,” which is the French equivalent of the Voice of Prophecy. The radio ministry stopped in 2014 when the Institut d’Etude de la Bible par Correspondance was established (IEBC, Biblical Study Institute by Correspondence).

Administrative Units

Reunion Mission was organized in 1936. It remained under a mission status until 1992 when it officially became a conference. Two years later, its legal association name was changed to its current designation: “Fédération des Eglises Adventistes de la Réunion.” Reunion Conference remains until today an entity under the governance the Indian Ocean Union Conference (IOUC).

Reunion Island Conference is currently composed of 17 churches and 2 companies. According to the latest annual statistical report of the General Conference, the total number of members at the end of 2019 was 1,288.

Challenges to mission

The presence and the expansion of Adventism have not been without challenges. The evangelist task was arduous at times. It was common to be insulted as “dirty protestants.” This insult was even found scribbled in the fresh concrete of a new church under construction. It was not uncommon for Adventist ministers to be greeted with stones in new areas. At times the police had to intervene to stop disturbances during the lectures. One of the main factors for these uncordial reactions was misinformation. Unfounded slanders about Adventists were spread around the island. Adventists were reported not to believe in Jesus and accused of trampling on the cross. Although some former biases continue to prevail in some people and secularism poses as a new challenge to Adventist mission, the public acceptance of Adventists has increasingly improved over time and the church looks for ways to continue bringing positive impact in the communities.

SOURCES


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NOTES


2. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


17. Vergès and Marimoutou, “Moorings,” 6.?


19. Ibid., 191.?


22. Ghasarian, “Patrimoine culturel,” 366.?


24. Ibid., 126. See also Dubut et al., “Genetic Diversity in Reunion,” 314.?

25. Vergès and Marimoutou, “Moorings,” 6.?

26. Ghasarian, “Patrimoine culturel,” 369.?


30. Hurbon, “Christianismes charismatiques,” 264.?  

31. Vergès and Marimoutou, “Moorings,” 6..?

32. Hurbon, “Christianismes charismatiques,” 264.?


34. Edgar A. Guest, “News from Afar,” *Australasian Record* 35.39 (1931): 2.?  


40. Ibid.?  

41. Ibid.?  


46. In 1939, thirty-six new members were added to the Church. The R. Devins family came as missionaries and a second church was built. Statistical Secretary of the General Conference, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1940), 235.?  

47.


54. Ibid.


59. Ibid.


68. Ibid.