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ERITREA

In Eritrea, the religious majority is Orthodox Christians while the second largest religious population is Islam. In 2002, the religious composition of Eritrea was as follows: 64 percent Christian (58 percent Orthodox, 5 percent Roman Catholic, less than 1 percent Protestant), 37 percent Muslim, and less than one percent traditional believer or ethnoreligionist. While the greater proportion of the country is Christian with an estimated population of over 3 million (3,250,849) in 2009, the Muslim population is almost 2 million (1,854,000).

Geographic Distribution of Religious Composition

Christians and Muslims are not evenly distributed geographically around the country. Christians are the majority in only two of the six administrative regions in the central highlands, while Muslims are predominant in the lowlands, the remaining four regions hugging the coastline.

The geographic distribution for the two predominantly Christian provinces is as follows. In Debub, Christians comprise almost 89 percent (85 percent Orthodox, 4 percent Roman Catholic, and less than 1 percent Protestant), while 11 are Muslims and less than 1 percent are ethnoreligionists. The population in Maekel is 94 percent Christian (almost 89 percent Orthodox, 4 percent Roman Catholic, and more than 1 percent Protestant) and 5 percent Muslim.

In the lowlands, Muslims are the majority. Anseba is comprised of 61 percent Muslims, 26 percent Orthodox, 13 percent Roman Catholic, less than 1 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent ethnoreligionist. In Debubawi Keih Bahri, the population is 62 percent Muslim, 36 percent Orthodox, 1 percent Roman Catholic, less than 1 percent Protestant, and less than 1 percent ethnoreligionists. Gash-Barka is composed of 63 percent Muslims, 31 percent Orthodox, 4 percent Roman Catholic, 1 percent ethnoreligionists, and 1 percent Protestants. Semenawi Keih Bahri is 87 percent Muslim, 12 percent Orthodox, and less than one percent of Roman Catholics, Protestants and ethnoreligionists.

Two Main Religions: Orthodox Christianity and Islam

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has had a strong influence on the country. Historically, these populations, many of which are from the Amhara of the Shoa and Hagerge regions of Ethiopia, have controlled the political structures of the region. From religious beliefs to calendars and land distribution, the Orthodox Church had great impact on the society from the 1500s to 1800s. As it aligned with the Ethiopian monarchy in the mid-1800s, the Orthodox Church played a central political role by divinely ordaining emperors and exacting taxes. In the 1950s, the Orthodox Church played an important role in the country's efforts for political independence. During the 1970s and 1980s, Christians and Muslims were both highly involved in the struggle for liberation.

Muslim influence was felt beginning in the early 8th century AD. Trade and migration from the Arabian Peninsula built up the influence of Islam. In the 19th century, Sufi brotherhoods had extensive missionary activities, extending the impact of Islam. By

the end of the century, most lowland groups were Muslim. After enjoying a period of proliferation in cultural institutions and communal life in the earlier part of the 20th century, Muslims experienced oppression and disintegration under Ethiopian rule as Eritrean autonomy decreased. Since liberation in 1991, Muslim communal life has been revitalizing at a cautious pace.

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FURTHER READINGS

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