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Rainbow of Religions: A Study of Mauritius

Mohammad Teisir Bin Shah Goolfee

Research Scholar

Department of Islamic Studies

Aligarh Muslim University

Email: gteisir@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Article History: Published Online: _Published_	Mauritius is a country which consists of a cosmopolitan culture. The population of Mauritius belongs to different ethnic groups which has shaped the country with the passage of time. Peaceful co-existence among different faiths has led to the development of positive plural societies where cultural and religious respect can be widely seen in the country. The people of different backgrounds have indeed played a significant role in maintaining mutual understandings amidst them. The aim of this paper is to highlight the main religions that are practiced within this small
Keywords: Mauritius, Religions, Constitutional Provisions, Interfaith Organization, Religious Tolerance	



	paradise island which is democratic too, and also accentuate the constitutional provisions and the interfaith organization (s) which prevails across the country to maintain religious tolerance.
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Mauritius is nestled off the east coast of Madagascar, about 200 kilometers from Réunion Island. It is located in the Indian Ocean and belongs, like Rodrigues and Réunion Island, to the Mascarene archipelago. Mauritius has an area of 1866 km². It was discovered by the Arab sailors (10th century) and Portuguese (16th century). Then, from 1638-1710, the Dutch inhabited it.ⁱ The name “Mauritius” was given after Prince Maurice of Nassau (Dutch: Mauritz van Nassau) of the Dutch Republic. After that, from 1715-1810, it came under the control of France, who named it as *Isle de France*. From 1810-1968, it was the British who occupied the island and remained there until Mauritius gained its independence on March 12th, 1968. On the very same date in 1992, Mauritius became a Republic as well.



One of the things which distinguishes Mauritius from the other paradisiacal islands that dot the planet is its fascinating history where different cultures mingle with African, European, Chinese and Indian influences. It is a highly interesting place for intrepid travelers and curious historians. This fascinating island grew from an uninhabited land in the 1600s to an eclectic land, filled with extraordinary people from all over the world who coexist peacefully.

Mauritians trace back their roots to nations as far as France up North and the Indian subcontinent to the East. This distinctive blend of native African people with European and Asian races lends Mauritius its one of a kind ethno-religious constitution. Furthermore, Mauritius consists of a range of religions. Due to the diversity of its people, Mauritius naturally boasts a varied religious landscape. Truth be told, this vast array of Mauritian religions is one of the most incredible aspects of the country. Religious freedom is granted to Mauritians, who can choose the faith they desire, which goes a long way in keeping the peace on the small island. As large as only a quarter of Corsica, the small multilingual



and multiethnic island of Mauritius consists of no official religion within the country as the population is so diverse.ⁱⁱ Despite of this fact, its citizens respect the different practices of all religions thus showing tolerance for the wide religious diversity.

Religious Demography

In a broader sense, the country of Mauritius is a well-being functioning democracy (secular) which respects the religious rights of all the communities residing on this paradise island. There exist almost no discriminatory elements on the grounds of religions. Each and every religious festival and celebration is performed and conducted with much gusto and are earmarked as national holidays.

According to the government of the United States of America, it provides the estimation of a total population in Mauritius to be of 1.3 million, as per the July 2016 estimate. Based on the 2010 local census, the following is the percentage of followers of different faiths in Mauritius:ⁱⁱⁱ



Hindus	48 %
Roman Catholic	26 %
Muslims	17 %
Other Christian Religious Groups (Seventh-Day Adventists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Evangelical Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and members of the Assemblies of God)	6 %
Buddhists, Animists and individuals who reported no religious affiliation and others.	3 %

It is interesting to note that there is the presence of a solid connection amidst the religious affiliation and ethnicity.

Hinduism

The history of the Indian communities settled in Mauritius is frequently considered to be a successful story. Within less than one



and a half century, they transformed from a quasi-enslaved minority to a majority group which led the struggle for independence and control the political sphere ever since.^{iv} When Mauritius came under the British rule, slavery was abolished in 1835. Therefore, slaves were replaced with Indian indentured servants.^v They were known as *Girmityas*.^{vi} These first Hindus who came to Mauritius were a heterogeneous proportion. Most of them belonged to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in Northern India and from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the South. Others belonged to Maharashtra and Gujarat. This makes Mauritius the only African nation with the 3rd highest Hindu population with Hinduism as the dominant religion after India and Nepal.

One of the Hindus' biggest festivals that is celebrated with great pomp is *Mahasivaratri*, (Siva's Great Night). This is a Hindu celebration which takes place yearly, four to nine days, in which the Hindus observe fast leading up to an all-night vigil of Siva worship. This day is declared as a public holiday and every Mauritian Hindu performs the pilgrimage at Grand Bassin, which is also known in Hindi as *Ganga Talao* (after the sacred Ganges



River in India). The Hindu devotees make a lengthy march and some walk even barefooted to reach the *Ganga Talao*.

Other important Hindu festivals in Mauritius include Thaipooosam Cavadee, honoring the South Indian God, Muruga. Although it is officially a Tamil holiday, thousands of non-Tamils join in to carry *Kavadi* (like *Kanwar*). *Ganesha Chaturthi* is another festival celebrated by the extensive Marathi-speaking community. It is also declared as a public holiday. This celebration is actually about the arrival of Lord Ganesha to earth, symbolizing him to be the Patron of Harmony. Then, *Diwali*(Festival of Lights) is also celebrated and that it is also declared as a national holiday. After that, the festival of *Ougadi* is celebrated by the Telugu community which marks the starting of their New Year. Various religious traditions and rituals are carried out by the devotees to purify themselves before the sunrise. This practice is known as *Mangala Snaanam*. This festival is celebrated to glorify the Hindu God of the universe, Brahma. Another festival is celebrated by the Tamil community which is known as *Tamizh Puttaandu*. It simply refers to the Tamil New Year. However, it is not declared as a national



holiday.^{vii} This celebration takes place on the first day of *Chithirai*, which is the first month in the Tamil Calendar and is also known as *Varusha Pirappu*.^{viii} Besides, Bhavani Singh (1900-1992), popularly known as Swami Krishnanand Saraswati was an Indian spiritual leader who had established Krishnanand Seva Ashram and the Human Service Trust in Mauritius in 1983. Popular for providing free and abundant clothes, food, money and religious literature, his main motto was *Service to man is service to God*.

Christianity

Christianity is the second-largest religion in the island of Mauritius. It concerns nearly a third of the Mauritians. Among them are descendants of white settlers or slaves (Creoles). There are 26.3% Catholics and 6.4% Protestants and Anglicans. Christianity emerged in Mauritius through the Dutch who colonized the country in 1638. When France took over in 1715, a decree was passed which mandated that all the incoming slaves are to be baptized Catholic. Christianity (particularly Protestantism) was further buttressed when the British imperialists occupied the



Mauritian territory. Currently, 83% of the Christians acknowledge themselves as Catholics.

Catholicism identifies God as the Holy Trinity, consisting of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Catholics of Mauritius stand by the holiness of the Priesthood and the Pope in Vatican City. Across the country, one can witness that mass is celebrated in various languages including Latin, French and English. Jacques-Désiré Laval (1803-1864), a French Roman Catholic priest, served in the missions in Mauritius. He arrived there in 1841.^{ix} Laval was also a professed member from the Spiritans.^x He was given the title of *Apostle of Mauritius* due to his determined contributions in helping the poor and the ill. Laval was beatified on April 29th, 1979. The reason for his beatification started in both Évreux and Port Louis (the current capital city of Mauritius) on a diocesan level before theologians examined and accepted his spiritual works on August 9th, 1916. The death date of Laval has become a yearly celebration. The annual pilgrimage to the parish church of Sainte-Croix (Mauritius) started on the day his funeral possession took place on September 9th, 1864. As far as Christian holidays are concerned, the



festivals of Assumption and Christmas are declared as national holidays across the country.

Islam

As far as Islam is concerned, like Hinduism, it penetrated the country through the Indian indentured laborers. They originally belonged to the regions of Gujarat, Pondicherry and Bengal in India. Affluent merchants of India who established their trade in Mauritius back then also played a significant role in propagating Islam in Mauritius. It is a lesser known fact that it was the Muslim Arabs who first discovered the island of Mauritius and christened it as *Dina Arobi*. Most of the Mauritian Muslims are Sunnis. Besides speaking the local language (Creole), they can also speak Urdu and Bhojpuri languages as well.

The whole Muslim community in Mauritius can be demarcated into three groups:

1. **The Memons** - (They control some of the prominent mosques in Mauritius)
2. **The Surtees** (They are rich Gujarati and Kutch merchants)



3. **Hindi Calcottias** (The indentured laborers from Bihar)

The first mosque built in Mauritius in 1805 was known as the *Camp des Lascars Mosque*. Currently, it is known as the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is located in Plaine-Verte, Port Louis, Mauritius. The Jummah Mosque, also situated in Port Louis at Royal Road, Al, Queen Street, was constructed in the 1850s. It was formerly known as *Mosquée des Arabes* (Mosque of the Arabs). Jummah Mosque is one of the architectural masterpieces in Mauritius with its pristine white façade and green trimmings.

As for the national holiday, only *Eid-Ul-Fitr* is declared so. Apart from it, though not being declared as public holidays, festivals like ‘*Āshūrā*’, *Yaum al-Nabi*, *Gyarvi Sharif* (11th Rabi' al-Akhir) which is also known as *Fatiha Yazdaham* or *Fatiha Do Azdaham*, *Mi'rāj* (Shab-i-Mi'rāj / 27th Rajab), *Nisf Sha'bān* (Shab-i-Bara'a/15th Sha'bān) and *Eid-Ul-Adha* (Dhu al-Hijjah) are also celebrated by the Sunnis of Mauritius in a respectful way.

Institutions, Centres and Organizations



1. **Islamic Relief Mauritius** is a Non-governmental organization in Port Louis, Mauritius. It collects money from Muslims every year to invest financially in realizing various Islamic projects, to distribute foods and medicines to the poor Muslim countries.
2. **Jamiat-UI-Ulama of Mauritius** was founded in the 1970s with the aim to propagate the religion of Islam in different forms. Firstly, it is to educate the children in Madrassahs as well as the Muslims in general through Islamic speeches and forums. It also aims to provide Halal certificates regarding the consumption of foods.^{xi}
3. **Islamic Centre for Disabled Children (ICDC)** is a non - profitable Specialized School which caters for the physically and intellectually disabled children irrespective of community and social background. It came into existence on July 1st, 1998. This organization is financially sponsored by the Corporative Social Responsibility (CSR) fund (registration no: N/1060) and is managed by the director, Mrs Salima Bibi Alleemudder.^{xii}



4. **World Islamic Mission** is a Sunni Muslim Organization which was founded in 1972 by Sunni Dignitaries from countries across the globe in Makkah. It serves Muslims in Europe, the United States of America, North America, Africa and Asia. The World Islamic Mission is a leading Islamic-Socio-Benevolent Organization. Its headquarters is found in Bradford, England. The founder and Chief Patron was His Eminence Maulana Shah Ahmad Noorani Siddiqui Al Qadiri (RA). The World Islamic Mission (Mauritius) was founded in February 1975. Its aims are as follow:^{xiii}

- i. Promotion of the Islamic knowledge
- ii. Enhancement of social growth
- iii. The propagation of the authentic message of the Islamic Faith
- iv. To develop sincere love and respect for Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ
- v. To adhere to the teachings of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ



5. **Al Huda Wan Noor** is an Islamic Institution which propagates the true message of Islam on the basis of the Salafi Manhaj, primarily in Mauritius.^{xiv}
6. **Zamzam Islamic Centre** came into existence in 1996 and is located at Ail Doré Street, Port-Louis, Mauritius. Its president is Aboo Bakar Bahemia Ariff. The objective is to spread Islam via different Islamic educational undertakings. It also works to help the poor and advise the Muslim community about Islam. Zamzam Islamic Centre can be said to a social, political and religious organization.^{xv}
7. **Quran House: The Islamic Circle** is a non-profit organization which works to ease facilitate networking, educating and empowering the youth of today to be citizens of tomorrow's community. It was founded in 1959 and that the Islamic Circle applied for a status as a charitable organization in Mauritius in 1975. In 1988, Quran House was inaugurated at 23, Boundary Road, Rose-Hill, Mauritius as a cultural and educational complex. It is non-political as well as non-sectarian. Since then, the Organization strives to



establish constructive and positive coexistence between cultures, faiths and different communities.^{xvi}

8. **Dar ul Uloom Aleemiah Madrassah** Aleemiah Madrassah is an Islamic institution located in Highlands/Phoenix, Mauritius, aiming for the promotion of Islamic Studies. Its foundation stone was laid down by Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddiqui (RA), who was a descendant of Abu Bakr Siddique (RA).^{xvii}

Buddhism

Apart from the three above-discussed religions, Buddhism is practiced by less than 1 % of the Mauritian population. This religion entered Mauritius via the Sino Mauritians (Mauritians with Chinese origins) who migrated to Mauritius in 19th century. Its teachings are derived from Gautama Buddha of India. There are two major Buddhist Schools which exist, namely The Theravada and the Mahayana. Buddhist traditions aim to triumph over sufferings and liberate from the cycle of life and death by the attainment of *Nirvana*.^{xviii} Devotees of Buddhism practice the



Middle Path, which is characterized by neither extreme asceticism nor excessive extravagances.

The Sino-Mauritian community celebrates the Chinese New Year Festival, which is also known as the Spring Festival as well as *Chūnjié* in China, and also the Lantern Festival. It is celebrated at the China Town Area in Port Louis. In Mauritius, the celebration of the Chinese New Year is famously known as *Kung Shee Fat Choy* which means Happy New Year.^{xix} It is declared as a public holiday as well. The Dharmarakshita Mahayana Buddhist Centre in Quatre Bornes aims for meditation, philosophy studies, retreats and therapy. It is considered to be a place for personal practice, self-development, training of the mind and serene retreat for a harmonious.^{xx}

Bahá'ísm

Bahá'ísm is followed by a very tiny amount of people in Mauritius. It is considered to be the youngest amongst the independent religions that exist in the world. It was founded by Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí Núrí (1817-1892), popularly known as Bahá'u'lláh, a popular



Persian religious leader in Tehran, Iran. *Bahá'ism* is also known as the *Bahá'í Faith*. The adherers of this faith emerged in Mauritius in 1953 which advocates that mankind is one single race and that its unification into one universal society is of utmost significance. The *Bahá'ís* aim to eradicate all kinds of partialities and establish a global society consisting of unanimity, prosperity, fairness and peace.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the *Bahá'í Faith* in Mauritius is situated in Port Louis and supervises the organizational affairs of the Bahá'ís including their spiritual and ethical progress. *Ridván*, a twelve-day festival which honors the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, is the most important *Bahá'í* festival across the country.^{xxi}

Constitutional Provisions

The Mauritius Constitution prevents discrimination on the basis of creed and allows its citizens the right to propagate their religious beliefs. The Constitution provides the following:^{xxii}



i. **In Chapter II - PROTECTION OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS OF THE INDIVIDUAL, Article 3. Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the Individual**

It is hereby recognized and declared that in Mauritius there have existed and shall continue to exist without discrimination by reason of race, place of origin, political opinions, color, creed or sex, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest, each and all of the following human rights and fundamental freedoms.

ii. **Article 11. Protection of Freedom of Conscience**

(1) Except with his own consent, no person shall be hindered in the enjoyment of his freedom of conscience, and for the purposes of this section, that freedom includes freedom of thought and of religion, freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and both in public and in private, to manifest and



propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

- (2) Except with his own consent (or, if he is minor, the consent of his guardian), no person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if that instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion that he does not profess.
- (3) No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from making provision for the giving, by persons lawfully in Mauritius, of religious instruction to possess of that community or denomination in the course of any education provided by that community or denomination.
- (4) No person shall be compelled to take any oath that is contrary to his religion or belief or to take oath in a manner that is contrary to his religion or belief.
- (5) Nothing contained in or done under the authority of any law shall be held to be inconsistent with or in contravention of



this section to the extent that the law in question makes provision:

- (a) In the interests of defense, public safety, public order, public morality or public health.
- (b) for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons, including the right to observe and practice any religion or belief without the unsolicited intervention of persons professing any other religion or belief, except so far as that provision or, as the case may be, the thing done under its authority is shown not to be reasonably justifiable in a democratic society.

iii. Article 14. Protection of Freedom to Establish Schools

- (1) No religious denomination and no religious, social, ethnic or cultural association or group shall be prevented from establishing and maintaining schools at its own expense.

iv. Article 16. Protection from Discrimination

- (1) No law shall make any provision that is discriminatory either of itself or in its effect.



(2) No person shall be treated in a discriminatory manner by any person acting in the performance of any public function conferred by any law or otherwise in the performance of the functions of any public office or any public authority.

Council of Religions

Council of Religions (CoR) is a Non-Governmental Organization located in Port Louis that nurtures understanding in the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies in Mauritius. Its aim is the promotion of accord and involvement in the process of peace-building activities between all people via educational training. Since 1994, continuous attempts have been made to embolden interreligious interactions and direct religious leadership in Mauritius.

The CoR came into existence officially in 2001 in the wake of the World Peace Summit convened in 2000 under the patronages of the United Nations to give birth to peace and interreligious discourse. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Bahá'ism are the five religions which form the center of the Council with the objective to



traject the religious powers, establish peaceful environments and execute a better living in Mauritius.^{xxiii}

Conclusion

Based on the above discussions, it can be said that Mauritius is a country where religious tolerance holds a strong position. The various ethnic communities of this paradise island undoubtedly co-exist harmoniously and that the clashes on the basis of religion are seldom heard of. Mauritius mostly consists of plural societies where people of different faiths reside within one arena without disrespecting each other's religious entourage. This is the reason why it is known to be an example of a successful multicultural country in the world.

Notes and References

ⁱClaveyrolas, Mathieu, *'Indo-Mauritians' and the Indian Ocean: literacy accounts and anthropological readings*, Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, Volume 13, Issue 2, 2017, p.174



ⁱⁱ <https://www.villanovo.com/guides/mauritius/culture-traditions>

ⁱⁱⁱ *International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, United States, Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor*

^{iv} Claveyrolas, M., *Quand l'hindouisme est creole: Plantation et indianité à l'île Maurice*. Paris:éditions de l'EHESS, 2017

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^{vi} Ghoshal, Devjyot, *The forgotten story of India's colonial slave workers who began leaving home 180 years ago*, Quartz India, 2014

^{vii} <https://www.gppstudio.net/public-holidays-news/2019/mauritius-2020-public-holidays-announced-011909.htm>

^{viii} <https://www.officeholidays.com/holidays/mauritius/tamil-new-year>

^{ix} <https://www.dioceseportlouis.org/historique/bienheureux-jacques-desire-laval/>

^x Spiritans is also known as The Congregation of the Holy Spirit. It is basically a Catholic religious congregation founded in France in 1703 by Claude-François Poullart des Places (1679-1709), who was a French Catholic priest. Its motto is *Cor unum et anima una* (One heart and one spirit). Their objective has been so far to evangelize the poor and the marginalized across the globe.

^{xi} <http://www.jamiat-ul-ulama.org/node/526>

^{xii} <http://www.icdcspecialisedschool.mu/>

^{xiii} <https://islaminafrica.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/world-islamic-mission-mauritius-branch-about-wim/>



^{xiv}<https://www.facebook.com/pg/Al-Huda-Wan-Noor-Trust-Fund-260782637265323/about/>

^{xv}<https://islaminafrika.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/zamzam-islamic-centre-about-zamzam-islamic-centre/>

^{xvi}https://www.facebook.com/pg/QuranHouseMauritius/about/?ref=page_internal

^{xvii}<http://www.findglocal.com/MU/Vacoas-Phoenix/380947858754649/Dar-ul-uloom-Aleemiah-madrassah---Mauritius>

^{xviii} *Nirvana*, in the literal sense, means to blow out or to quench. It is mostly used to describe the soteriological goal in Buddhism. Technically speaking, *Nirvana* is the phase of independence from all agonies that Buddhists believe can be obtained through the eradication of all personal desires.

^{xix}<http://www.maninmauritius.com/kung-shee-fat-choy/>

^{xx}<https://vymaps.com/MU/Dharmarakshita-Buddhist-Mahayana-Study-Group-1463927437159346/>

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^{xxii}https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/--ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_126778.pdf

^{xxiii}<https://uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/council-religions-mauritius>