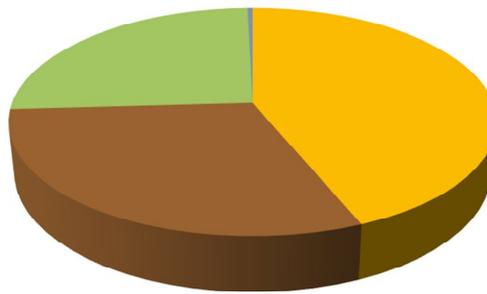


BENIN



	Christian (43.8%) Catholics: 10.6% Protestant: 33.2%
	Ethnoreligionist (30.4%) ¹
	Muslim (25.5%) Sunni: 25.4% Other: 0.1%
	Other (0.3%)

Area: 112,622 km ²	Population²: 10,448,647	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): French, Fon and Yoruba, tribal languages ³
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Legal framework on freedom of religion and its application

Benin, a relatively small nation in West Africa, has for some years now been under increasing threat from Islamist jihadism. Such extremism has already caused a spiral of violence in a number of neighbouring countries. Not without reason therefore, Benin is involved in the 8,000-strong international African intervention force trying to drive out the Islamist terror group Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, Benin's eastern neighbour. Benin also supports the UN military intervention force stationed due north in Mali, which has been set up to combat Islamist terrorism.⁴

Benin's clear stance against Islamist violence suggests that the country will increasingly be targeted by jihadist organisations in West Africa, although at the time of writing no major acts of violence have been reported.

There has never been a tradition of religious fundamentalism in Benin, be it in the field of the legislature or in the people's practice of their faith. Religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution as a fundamental human right, and at the same time is upheld as a core principle concerning inter-religious interaction. Benin has perhaps the widest variety of religious faiths in the region. The state respects and promotes this pluralism and grants the equivalent of around US\$1 million in state funds, which is available to all the major religious communities.⁵ By Western standards, this is not a large sum, but for a country as poor as Benin it is certainly significant and indicates that inter-faith relations are peaceful.

That 17 percent of Benin's population still practise Voodoo is indicative of a religious practice that is widespread in West Africa. Meanwhile, Muslims and Catholics are of comparable number. A small proportion of people belong to the Eglise du Christianisme Céleste, the 'Celestial Christians', a strictly Bible-based Christian community. It was founded in Benin in 1947, and is also present in a few other West African countries.

There is a broad overlap of different religious denominations in practice, with some Christians and Muslims also practising voodoo – although not always openly.⁶ In Benin this kind of syncretism is widespread among all social groups, and in all regions of the country, and perhaps for this reason is broadly accepted. It can even occur within families, without seemingly leading to major tensions or conflicts.

Incidents

Benin's tradition of peaceful inter-religious relations has not changed during the period under review. As mentioned above, in 2015 the country showed its commitment to religious tolerance and harmonious coexistence by sending soldiers to neighbouring Nigeria to join the fight against Boko Haram.⁷

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

The parliamentary elections of 26th April 2015 again confirmed Benin as one of the more stable nations of West Africa. The governing party of President Thomas Boni Yayi, *Force Cauris pour un Bénin Emergent* (FCBE) – *Amana Alliance*, had success, gaining 30.2 percent of the vote, thus securing 33 (-10) of the 83 seats in parliament.

For the Catholic Church in Benin, problems today are less to do with external forces and more an issue of superficial practice of the faith. Although Catholicism continues to spread, Pope Francis said during the Benin bishops' ad limina visit in April 2015 that the country's faith was "often only superficial" and lacking in "stability". He said a "clear understanding of the Christian mystery" should not be "the privilege of an elite" but must be accessible to all the faithful. This was all the more important given that people in Benin were "exposed to many different ideological and media driven attacks". Of crucial importance was the need for a sound marriage and family life. Pope Francis said: "I know that this is difficult, given the current social and cultural situation of your people." But he urged the bishops not to lose courage. He said: "The family, as it is defended by the Catholic Church, is an institution willed by God."

The Catholic Church in Benin is respected as a moral authority, not only in theological matters, but also in the social and political fields. Many people in Benin have a strong memory of Pope Francis' predecessor, Benedict XVI, visiting Benin in 2011. Many non-Catholics saw the visit positively, looking on it as a new beginning of religious consciousness.

¹ U.S. Department of State 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

² CIA 2016: The World Factbook, estimate, July 2015

³ CIA 2016: The World Factbook

⁴ https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_E3E699E545F4DD1F4F162A52B3202DEE/DE/Laenderinformationen/00-SiHi/BeninSicherheit.html?nn=354026#doc353994bodyText1

<http://www.zeit.de/news/2015-08/02/benin-benin-will-800-soldaten-fuer-kampf-gegen-boko-haram-stellen-02065609>

⁵ U.S. Department of State 2016: International Religious Freedom Report for 2014

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ http://de.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/16/nigeria_armut_gibt_boko_haram_auftrieb/1151428