

Kiribati

POPULATION 103,248

ROMAN CATHOLIC 55.8 percent

KIRIBATI PROTESTANT 33.5 percent

MORMON 4.6 percent

BAHÁ'Í 2.2 percent

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST 2 percent

ASSEMBLY OF GOD 0.4 percent

TE KOAUA 0.4 percent

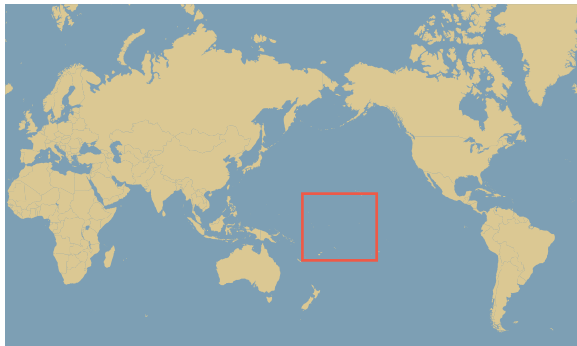
CHURCH OF GOD 0.3 percent

MUSLIM 0.1 percent

OTHER 0.2 percent

NONAFFILIATED 0.1 percent

NOT REPORTED 0.4 percent



Country Overview

INTRODUCTION The Republic of Kiribati is an independent, predominantly Christian nation in the central Pacific Ocean (between Hawaii and Australia) composed

of the Gilbert Islands, Phoenix Islands, and Line Islands. For the I-Kiribati, or people of Kiribati, the environment produced a spiritual landscape shaped by the sea and a dynamic culture that survived centuries of scarcity and drought. The 17 islands of the Gilberts are the original home of the I-Kiribati, and from Makin in the north to Arorae in the south, the islands straddle the equator for a distance of about 546 miles (880 kilometers). The islands are a predominantly coral atoll except for Banaba, which is a raised reef island. The average width of each is a few hundred meters from one side to the other, the widest being about 1 mile (3 kilometers). Tabiteuea, a chain of some 45 islets estimated at about 11 square miles (30 square kilometers), is the longest in the Gilberts. Tamana, which is less than 6 miles (10 kilometers) from one end to the other, is the smallest. While the population of Kiribati includes Tuvaluan, Chinese, and Europeans, ethnically it is relatively homogenous, and genealogical lines connect people on most islands.

The first people to settle in Kiribati—indeed, Oceania as a whole—were mainly Southeast Asians via Melanesia between 2000 and 1600 BCE. These settlers were masters of black magic and sorcery and were cunning in warfare. They were followed by more powerful fair-skinned groups from Tonga and Samoa around 1000 CE. Inter-island travel and intermarriage caused island communities to share many of their particular traits and customs, and by the time the *maneaba* (meeting house) and its system of government was established around 1560, a common way of life—*te katei ni Kiribati*—was emerging. The first Europeans to visit the Gilberts were the Spaniards in 1606, when Pedro Fernández de Quirós (1565–1614) of the Spanish Navy and his crew landed on

Butaritari. Christian missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) were the first in Kiribati, arriving in Koinawa village on Abaiang in November 1857. The group worked mainly in the northern and central Gilberts. The London Missionary Society arrived in 1870 and concentrated in the southern islands. Roman Catholic missionaries came to Kiribati in 1888 at the behest of Roman Catholics from the island of Nonouti who were introduced to Catholicism during their time in Tahiti as plantation laborers. Because of the rivalry and competition between Roman Catholic and Protestants missionaries, Christianity spread very quickly throughout the islands; by 1945, 95 percent of the island population was Christian, a trend that has continued into the 21st century.

Religious life in early-21st-century Kiribati, while diverse, involves most people on the islands. In addition to the majority Roman Catholics, other Christians in Kiribati include Seventh-day Adventists, Mormons, and members of the Church of God and the Assembly of God. There is also the Church of the Four Square, the Church of the Living Water, the Church of the Apostles, and the Jehovah's Witnesses (Te Koaua). All religious groups have been growing in the early 21st century at roughly the same rate as the overall population, with three exceptions: Church of God membership has declined; Mormon growth has been particularly strong, with numbers nearly doubling between the 2005 and 2010 censuses; and a new group, Te Koaua, has appeared, attracting 0.4 percent of the population. Many I-Kiribati continue to acknowledge the existence of the indigenous gods and spirits; Christianity and modernity are usually held in tandem with indigenous culture and spirituality. A small group of I-Kiribati adhere to the Bahá'í faith. Islam is new on the islands and is found mainly on Tarawa.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE The constitution of Kiribati provides for freedom of religion, but historically there has been tension and competition between Roman Catholics and Protestants. A step toward tolerance was taken in 1975, when the first combined church service was held in the Catholic Cathedral at Teoraereke on Tarawa. In 1989 the Roman Catholic Church and the Kiribati Protestant Church founded the Kiribati National Council of Churches to promote unity among the Christian denominations. The council is open to all churches that accept the Trinity (one God existing in three persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Religious values and practices pervade every aspect of life in Kiribati. For example, all formal gatherings, including government and family events, begin with a prayer.

Major Religions

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

KIRIBATI PROTESTANT CHURCH

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

DATE OF ORIGIN 1888 CE

NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS 57,600

HISTORY In 1881 two Catholic catechists, Betero and Tiroi—natives of Nonouti who had converted to Catholicism while working on European plantations on Tahiti—introduced the religion to the Gilbert Islands. Their zeal for Catholicism, which was reflected in the church services and educational programs they led, helped them in their efforts to convert islanders. After baptizing more than 500 people, Betero and Tiroi wrote to the apostolic vicar for Central Oceania asking for a priest. The first priests began their work on Nonouti in 1888, with the first Mass being held on a ship in the middle of a lagoon. The priests established a Catholic mission station at Tebuange village; it was soon transferred to Umante-wenei village, where the priests built a church. The faith quickly spread to the islands of Nikunau and Butaritari. Joseph Leray, one of the priests who had arrived in 1888, eventually became the Gilbert Islands' first bishop.

Catholicism continued to spread in Kiribati, in part because priests were more tolerant than the Protestants regarding dancing and smoking or chewing tobacco. They also distributed gifts, such as clothes, tobacco, mirrors, nails, and knives. Furthermore, since indigenous religions on the islands promoted the existence and power of *anti* (spirits and ghosts), the belief among Roman Catholics of saints and other heavenly beings was more familiar and offered more protection to islanders than aspects of Protestantism. Indeed, the strict puritanical teaching of the Protestants and their Sunday observance had an adverse effect on the growth of the Protestant membership.

Over the years Roman Catholic churches were established on all of the islands except the two southernmost islands—Tamana and Arorae—which remain primarily Protestant. In the early 21st century, Catholic Church

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Paul Mea, I-Kiribati Bishop

Known in Kiribati as the “Bishop of Independence,” Paul Eusebius Mea Kaiuea was born on Beru Island on December 16, 1939. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1969 and appointed as the parish priest of North Tarawa. His work brought him to the attention of Bishop Pierre Guichet (1915–1997). Following Guichet’s resignation in 1978, Mea was selected as his successor, becoming the first I-Kiribati to serve in the position. In February 1979, just months before Kiribati gained its independence, Mea was installed as bishop in front of a crowd of 7,000. The ceremony was notable for the new bishop’s insistence on addressing parishioners using his canoe as a makeshift dais.

As bishop, Mea committed himself to improving the lives of the people of Kiribati, reaching out to Catholic organizations in the region for support. In 1991 he was instrumental in bringing members of Australia’s Good Samaritan Sisters, a Catholic women’s organization, to Kiribati, where they have spearheaded educational programs. Mea has at times been the center of controversy. In 2003 he was accused by unsuccessful presidential candidate Taberannang Timeon of urging his parishioners to vote for the reelection of President Teburoro Tito (1953– ; served 1994–2003), a claim he has denied. Despite such controversy, Mea remains popular with his parishioners and is well known in the region for his devotion to Kiribati.

membership includes more than half the population of Kiribati.

EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS Father Edward Bontemps was an important figure in the spread of Catholicism throughout the Gilbert Islands. He arrived on Tabiteuea in 1892 and eventually converted 3,600 people and baptized 600. Bishop Paul Mea (1939–), an I-Kiribati, was appointed head of the Catholic Church in Kiribati in 1979.

MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND WRITERS Father Ernest Sabatier (1886–1965) created the first concise Kiribati-

French dictionary. He also wrote a history of the Gilbert Islands in French, *Sous l’équateur du Pacifique* (1938; published in English as *Astride the Equator* in 1977). Sister Alaima Talu is a well-known Kiribati historian of Tuvaluan heritage. Emerging Roman Catholic theologians include Fathers Koru Tito and Martin Everi, but like all I-Kiribati religious laypeople and trained clerics, much of their time is spent in teaching or administration, with little opportunity for research and publication.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES The headquarters of the Kiribati Catholic Church are located in Teoraareke on South Tarawa and include the Sacred Heart Cathedral. Church services in most parishes are slightly different from those in other countries but similar to services in other parts of the Pacific. For example, churches often do not have seats, and congregations sit or kneel on the floor.

WHAT IS SACRED Most Catholics in Kiribati have in their houses a homemade shrine to Jesus, Mary, or the Holy Spirit. Sometimes these consist of a statue surrounded by plastic flowers and other decorations.

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS There are no Catholic holidays that are distinctive to Kiribati. The most significant holidays are Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas. On these festive days, islanders congregate in one village and celebrate the events, which include plays to reenact the stories of Easter or Christmas, dancing competitions, sporting events, and singing. Christmas festivities usually extend into the second week of the New Year.

MODE OF DRESS There is no special mode of dress for Catholic I-Kiribati; they dress in Western-style clothing, as is common in most Pacific Island countries.

DIETARY PRACTICES The Catholic Church does not restrict the diet of its members, but fasting is practiced during Lent or as a way to strengthen prayer. Fasting is especially significant in a country where food is considered central to hospitality and to the maintenance and demonstration of kin relationships. Catholics are discouraged from holding major social functions, such as weddings and birthdays, during Lent, because they involve major feasts for families and friends.

RITUALS The various elements of the Catholic Mass have been indigenized in some places in Kiribati, and Kiribati cultural elements are involved in the service or in



Many people have gathered to celebrate mass at this church in Bikenibeu. © HOLGER LEUE/LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES.

daily home rituals. Indigenous elements include liturgical dancing in traditional costume, particularly during the offertory procession. Most Catholic communities have a charismatic song-and-dance group that leads meetings and other feasts. During Communion, as in most Pacific churches, Catholics usually just receive bread (the body of Christ) but not wine (the blood of Christ). The absence of the wine is mainly for economic reasons. Catholic weddings are often a syncretic blend of Kiribati and Catholic practices; they typically involve traditional feasting, singing, and dancing.

rites of passage Catholic rites of passage include the sacraments of baptism, First Communion, confirmation, and marriage. There is nothing distinctive about their practice in Kiribati.

MEMBERSHIP Because dancing was prohibited from the mid-19th century to about the end of the 1930s by Protestant missionaries due to the time wasted in rehearsals and the fact that it was often the cause of family disputes and estrangement between couples, many I-Kiribati saw a connection to their cultural pastime with the Roman Catholic Church, which did not forbid dancing. However, the growth of the Catholic Church in Kiribati really began during the 20th century, with the introduction of natural family-planning methods. This

resulted in a population explosion among I-Kiribati Roman Catholics. No outreach activities to gain new members from other churches are organized by either the Roman Catholic Church or the KPC, and although conversions do take place, members of the new religious groups and churches come mainly from KPC membership.

SOCIAL JUSTICE The Catholic Church in Kiribati runs six secondary schools, which educate almost one-third of the secondary school population. The nuns of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart support Te Itoi ni Ngaina, a women's collective at Teoraereke, Tarawa, that promotes local women's arts, crafts, and cooking.

SOCIAL LIFE For Catholic I-Kiribati families, which are characteristically large, it is an honor to have a family member who devotes his or her life to the church. In a devout Catholic family at least one son or daughter becomes a priest or nun. This is seen as adding to the spiritual wealth of the family. Like most Kiribati families, men are generally the head of the family and are expected to look after their family and protect them. Women are considered subordinates, and their role is to support their male members in their execution of their tasks, which may include bringing food home or building a new house or canoe, as well as the various obligations or duties of his family to the village maneaba (meeting house) and community.

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POLITICAL IMPACT The Catholic Church has played a major role in politics in Kiribati since the early days of conversion. In most communities church leadership maintains the foremost position of power, ahead of both the national government and the island councils. If a constituency is primarily Catholic, it will likely support a Catholic candidate for office.

The church became directly involved in political controversy in the mid-1980s when the bishop of Tarawa created a manifesto condemning the government's negotiation of a fishing agreement with the Soviet Union. Catholics throughout the nation protested the negotiations, claiming an association with the Communist Soviet Union would jeopardize the spiritual well-being of the Kiribati people.

The most pressing political issue facing Kiribati in the early 21st century is how to cope with climate change, which is causing the level of the Pacific Ocean to rise. Fresh water is being contaminated by sea water, and homes and public buildings have had to be temporarily moved to higher ground. In addition, fish stock has been radically reduced, and the heat makes fishing more difficult. Many of the islands may become uninhabitable by the mid-21st century. These challenges have prompted President Anote Tong (1952– ; served 2003–) to bring the population together in support of education programs that teach people how to protect the few sources of fresh water

that remain. Political and Catholic (as well as other religious) leaders also have been discussing plans for eventual migration. Religious groups have made appeals to members around the world for assistance in the inevitable migration from Kiribati caused by the rising ocean.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES A major controversy surrounds the issue of family planning—an issue with growing significance, given Kiribati's small land area and rapidly increasing population. The Catholic Church in Kiribati, like the church in the rest of the world, frowns upon preventative methods such as the birth control pill or condoms. It actively promotes the Billings Method and the rhythm method; in fact, Catholic medical and paramedical staffs in Kiribati are instructed to promote the Billings Method to Catholics. In addition, the church has fought attempts to introduce sex education in schools. Same-sex marriage is not accepted by most people in Kiribati, and the Roman Catholic leadership is yet to declare its views on this matter.

CULTURAL IMPACT Over the course of the 20th century, Catholic communities have developed contemporary Kiribati music using string bands and singing groups, both in Kiribati and on Rabi in Fiji, where many I-Kiribati live. This kind of music became popular particularly because it is livelier than traditional music or Protestant music.



Rising seas due to climate change threaten the islands of Kiribati, but this breakaway Catholic sect in Abarao, Tarawa Island, believes Jesus has risen and will save Kiribati. © JUSTIN MCMANUS/THE AGE/FAIRFAX MEDIA VIA GETTY IMAGES.

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Alphonsis Kanimea (1916–1997) was an I-Kiribati catechist who composed a significant number of hymns in the Kiribati language. His compositions are widely sung in Catholic communities in Fiji and Kiribati.

KIRIBATI PROTESTANT CHURCH

DATE OF ORIGIN 1852 CE

NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS 34,600

HISTORY Protestantism arrived on the Gilbert Islands in 1852 via missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) who, on their way to Micronesia, stopped on Butaritari Island. In 1857 American missionary Reverend Hiram Bingham Jr. (1831–1908) came to Abaiang and found converts through a rigorous educational program that included translating the Bible into the local language. One of the ABCFM's primary goals was to encourage literacy in order to train potential Gilbertese pastors. The group also used Pacific Islander missionaries, particularly Hawaiians, who were left in charge of ministries in the southern Gilberts. The missionaries made some conversions, but their strict requirements for Sunday observance and their opposition to dancing and smoking were not attractive to most Gilbertese.

The London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived in the southern Gilberts in 1870. The first contingent included a number of Samoan pastors. The Samoans' success may have been helped by the existence within Gilbertese mythology of a land called "Tamoā," causing some to believe the Samoans were distant relatives who had come to share with them the Good News, or Gospel. However, the real cause for the success of the LMS mission in the southern islands more likely was the fear of the Peruvian slave traders who had visited some of the islands. Traders forcibly took men and women on their ships to sell them as slaves in plantations in South America and in other parts of the Pacific. Those who turned to Christianity were under the protection of the Samoan missionaries, who were in turn protected by the British navy because they were working for a British mission.

The two Protestant missions shared the work in Kiribati. The ABCFM worked mainly in northern and central Kiribati, with its headquarters on Abaiang, while the LMS focused in the south and had its headquarters on Beru, which included a ministerial training center for LMS local pastors. There was also a training school to

advise women on how to conduct themselves as wives of the local pastors when they graduated.

The ABCFM transferred ministerial duties to the LMS in 1917. By then the Gilbert Islands were governed by the British. In the 1960s newly trained Gilbertese pastors replaced the Samoan ministers. The Gilbert Islands Protestant Church became an autonomous local church from the LMS in 1968, at which point approximately half of the population was Protestant. Upon independence in 1979 the Gilbert Islands Protestant Church became the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC).

During the 1980s the KPC embarked on a series of ambitious building projects, which put great financial pressure on its members, leading, among other things, to a membership decline. In the early 21st century new religious movements often find converts among the membership of the KPC. Nevertheless, the church continues to maintain support and wield significant cultural and political clout throughout Kiribati.

EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS In 1857 a mission was established at Koinawa, Abaiang, by ABCFM minister Hiram Bingham Jr., with the help of a Hawaiian missionary named Kanoa. Bingham built a church there and also began to create a Gilbertese orthography (the establishment of correct spelling for a language). The first LMS missionaries to the Gilberts, in the 1870s, included Reverend S. J. Whitmee (1838–1925) and a Gilbertese man named Tanre.

Prominent Kiribati Protestant Church ministers in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have included Reverend Bureieta Karaiti, the church's general secretary, and Reverend Baiteke Nabetari, moderator of the KPC.

MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS Kambati Uriam, a KPC minister (active beginning in the late 20th century), is a historian of Gilbertese oral traditions. Many I-Kiribati theologians have emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries after graduating from the Pacific Theological College.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES The main KPC church building is located in Antebuka, Tarawa. Its architecture exhibits a conventional Western style. The church's name—Bangotan Kristo—initially provoked controversy. The Kiribatese word *bangota*, meaning "shrine," was usually associated with ancestral worship. Many objected to giving a Christian church a pagan

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name. People later began to accept a Christian interpretation of the word.

WHAT IS SACRED The Bible is seen as the absolute authority for the KPC. Sundays are honored with church attendance and abstinence from work.

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS KPC members celebrate the same holidays and festivals as Protestant Christians in other countries. Apart from Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas, Protestants celebrate the coming of the Gospel to Kiribati, held annually on November 18. This is a thanksgiving celebration for the work of the pioneer missionaries and the role of the church in the development of the country through its pastors, schools, and various programs and activities.

MODE OF DRESS Protestants in Kiribati typically wear white to church, distinguishing them from Catholics. Church attire for Protestant men is usually a *lavalava* (cloth sarong) and a collared shirt, and women wear either a formal dress or a blouse with a skirt or *lavalava*. Protestant pastors wear a *sulu* (a type of skirt), suit jacket, and tie; in the early 21st century, however, some (including the head of the KPC) wear garments that resemble those of Catholic priests.

DIETARY PRACTICES Protestants are expected to refrain from consuming alcohol. The church in Kiribati has criticized the increasing consumption of kava, or *yaqona*, a traditional drink made from the *Piper methysticum* plant with sedative properties; it is imported from Fiji.

RITUALS KPC rituals, including Sunday service, are the same as those of other Protestant churches. Kiribati engagements and weddings, however, exhibit practices that combine Christian and indigenous cultural elements. For example, engagement celebrations usually occur over the course of a week and include dancing and feasting in which the bride's family lavishes gifts on the groom-to-be. The Christian elements lie mainly in the marriage ceremony.

rites of passage Potential members are interviewed by the minister, and then his or her name is brought before the church meeting. After some training the person must make a public confession before being admitted as a member.

MEMBERSHIP The KPC has been faced with losing members to groups such as the Mormons and the Bahá'ís.

Efforts to gain and retain members include religious instruction in public schools, outreach programs in hospitals and prisons, and radio broadcasts of Christian programs. In an effort to draw youth to the church, the KPC has encouraged the use of new music forms, such as rap music, in worship services.

SOCIAL JUSTICE The KPC takes an active role in youth education and sports and organizes large annual dance competitions. It also runs three high schools.

SOCIAL LIFE In general, the KPC promotes nuclear and extended family values along with patriarchal ideas of authority. Adultery, divorce, and having children out of wedlock are frowned upon. Protestant women are not very different from women of other faiths in Kiribati, and their understandings of their roles are practically similar. However, because of their early involvement in women's fellowship from the days of the American and Hawaiian missionaries from the late 19th century, Protestant women are more proficient, systematic, and methodical in their activities and in the way they organize their lives and their home. Many Protestant women view the pastor's wife as the ideal Kiribati woman—one who is expected to be the best helper to her husband, subordinate yet autonomous, creative, and the pride of her husband.

POLITICAL IMPACT In the early days of ABCFM missionary activity, two Hawaiian missionaries, Kapu and Nalimu, facilitated the conversion of most of the islands of Tabiteuea and in 1881 led a religious war that successfully converted the so-called pagan, or Tioba, adherents in the southern islands. Over the course of the war thousands of southern Tabiteueans were killed, and their land was claimed by the northerners and their Hawaiian leaders. The religious war forever changed land ownership across Tabiteuea Meang (North) and Tabiteuea Maiaki (South).

In the early days of elected representation to parliament many KPC pastors were elected to the House. One of the first political groups or parties established in Kiribati in the mid-1960s was the Nationalist Group; it was predominantly Protestant, and Reverend Amara Makaea, a teacher in the Protestant theological school, was its adviser. In the early 21st century most Kiribati Protestants tend to be more conservative or more culturally sensitive politically than Catholics. Those in politics, for instance, at times ignore the political preferences of their party if they consider them unethical and

uncultured and would leave their political group if they felt offended or betrayed. Indeed, most of the politicians who have crossed the floor in the Kiribati parliament are Protestants.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES The type of ministry that emerged in Kiribati, especially in the south, was one that was very connected to the Samoan tradition of respect to people of rank and status. As such, pastors have become important in the community, provided for and looked after by parishioners. In addition to funding their own activities and ministry, village churches are expected to support the pastor and pay a huge levy demanded by KPC headquarters to run its own activities and programs. These financial burdens have generally contributed to the church's declining membership.

Despite the patriarchal structure of the KPC, women's efforts within the church have been significant. The Protestant Women's Fellowship, or Reitan Aine ki Kamatu (RAK), was founded by pioneer missionary wives in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The RAK currently plays a major role in financially supporting the church. After years of women struggling for equality in the church, Tenikotabare Bokai of Tabiteuea and Nei Ota Tioti of Onotoa were ordained in 1984, becoming the first women pastors in the KPC.

Same-sex marriage for KPC members is not accepted in village churches. KPC leadership is yet to declare an official position on this matter.

CULTURAL IMPACT Members of the KPC are often exposed to new cultural ideas through interactions with different churches and members of the KPC living overseas. These exchanges are particularly manifested in new forms of dance and music, which are shared at social gatherings or dance competitions.

Other Religions

Prior to the arrival of Catholic missionaries in the late 19th century, I-Kiribati followed indigenous religious practices. They believed in a host of gods and spirits called *anti*. Among the many gods revered by the people in Kiribati, the most prominent are the deified ancestors Auriaria and Tabuariki, as well as Nei Tituabine and Nei Teiti. Tabuariki, the god of thunder, was associated with agriculture, and Auriaria—Au the *riaria* (feared, great or terrible)—was the god of war. A

few of the lesser spirits that are still invoked and much feared by I-Kiribati today are Rakunene of Abaiang and Te-Unimwane of Nonouti.

One example of an indigenous religion in Kiribati is a folk religion called Tioba, first practiced on Tabiteuea, in the southern Gilbert Islands. Followers worshipped a totem pole with bird feathers tied to its apex, which represented Tioba. The religion was considered a combination of the local cult of Riannewekabane with a Hawaiian cult introduced by islanders who had served on foreign vessels. The short-lived Tioba religion was taken to Tabiteuea in the 19th century by two Gilbertese who had learned of it in Tahiti and Fiji. The religion was then also known as Te Buraeniman and had become a syncretic blend of European ideas, Catholicism, and indigenous religious practices. During the religious wars between Christians and local religions in the 1880s, all members of Tioba were killed or forcefully converted to Protestantism.

Indigenous religious authority, especially in the southern islands, was vested in the maneaba, or meeting-house, headed by a group of male village elders (*unimwane*) and sanctioned by both ancestral spirits and indigenous gods. The maneaba system has changed considerably since British colonialism and Christian conversion in the late 19th century. While meetinghouses continue to exist, the use of the *boti* (traditional sitting places) and the different roles of village clans have changed. In addition, generational differences have been growing as I-Kiribati youth question the authority of their elders. Women's decision-making roles, previously marginalized under both maneaba authority and Christianity, have also been transforming as more women become educated in institutions shaped by Western values.

Despite the introduction—and now the dominance—of Christianity in Kiribati, indigenous beliefs have not been relinquished. People's daily lives continue to be shaped or directed by ancestors or pre-Christian deities. Dreams, in particular, are taken seriously. Many I-Kiribati (particularly those on the outer islands) engage in divining, magic associated with dance and sports competitions, and rites of passage beyond those of the churches. *Bangota*—sacred places devoted to indigenous gods—exist on most islands, and in some villages the bones or skulls of the ancestors are kept and cared for in the maneaba. These practices exist alongside Christianity, and few I-Kiribati see such multiple loyalties or practices as problematic. Indeed, a few

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Christian ministers have been known to practice magic. The pattern of Christianization and the persistence of traditional ways are familiar concepts in the Pacific Islands. The tensions produced as religious groups that were not present before find acceptance among some islanders is also familiar. While the pressure to remain loyal to the religion of birth is strong, the appeal of material advantages through newer groups is substantial.

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church was introduced to Kiribati in 1947, when Pastor John Howse arrived on Abemama in the Gilbert Islands. Howse converted a small number of Catholics and founded a Sabbath school in 1948. In 1954 the Kiribati Mission was formally organized under the jurisdiction of the Central Pacific Union (headquartered in Fiji). In 1972 the mission transferred to the Western Pacific Union in the Solomon Islands. The SDA Church moved to Tarawa in 1966, and churches were established at Tarawa, Kauma on Abemama, and Kuria Island between 1978 and 1982. The church runs Kauma High School on Abemama. In the early 21st century the number of SDA members in Kiribati numbered around 2,060.

In 1954 Roy and Elena Fernie of the National Spiritual Assembly in Panama introduced the Bahá'í faith on Abaiang in the Gilbert Islands. Bahá'í became a legal religion in 1955. In 1957 a wealthy nurse, Mabel Sneider, moved the Bahá'í headquarters from Abaiang to Bikenibeu in Tarawa. The first Pacific National Spiritual Assembly was formed in the Gilberts in 1967; it became the National Spiritual Assembly of Kiribati when the country achieved independence in 1979. It continues to attract a small but committed number of I-Kiribati, numbering about 2,300.

In 1976 indigenous students returning from Liahona College, the Mormon school in Tonga, brought the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the Gilbert Islands. The Mormon Mission in Tonga sent an American couple, Elder Hallet and his wife, to assist the students. They took over a private school at Eita, Tarawa, erecting new classrooms, dormitories, and staff quarters. The Mormons provided opportunities for I-Kiribati students to study overseas, which contributed to a growing membership. The Mormon school on Tarawa, Moroni High School, stands out because its facilities are above the standards of other Kiribati schools. In the 1980s there was tension between the growing Mormon presence and the Kiribati Protestant Church, which distributed anti-Mormon propaganda. Many Mormon students attend universities in Hawaii and Utah and are

encouraged to return to Kiribati for missionary work. Mormons numbered approximately 4,700 in the early 21st century, making it the third-largest religious group in Kiribati.

Katerina Teaiwa

Revised by Gary Bouma and Kambati Uriam

See Also Vol. I: *Christianity, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism*

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