

# Catalonia home to 722 houses of worship for a dozen different minority faiths

Congregations of Evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims are the three most prevalent in Catalonia

S. PÉREZ / A. LEFF

The religious landscape in Catalonia is pluralistic, diverse and ever-changing. Apart from the Catholic religion, with its 2,419 churches, the Catalan government counts 12 different minority faiths, whose combined houses of worship add up to 722.

Jewish synagogues, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, Seventh Day Adventist and Jehovah's Witness churches, the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints, Muslim mosques, and other places of worship for Hindus, Sikhs, Taoists, Buddhists and members of the Bahai faith are among the growing wealth of Catalonia's religions.

Three of the most prevalent minority religious groups are the Protestant, Jehovah's Witness and Muslim communities, according to a recent study, entitled *Les altres religions. Minorities a Catalunya (The Other Religions. Minorities in Catalonia)*, that was presented on Monday.

The study, directed by the sociologist, Joan Estruch, is an attempt to map the vast array of faiths in Catalonia. It is based on the

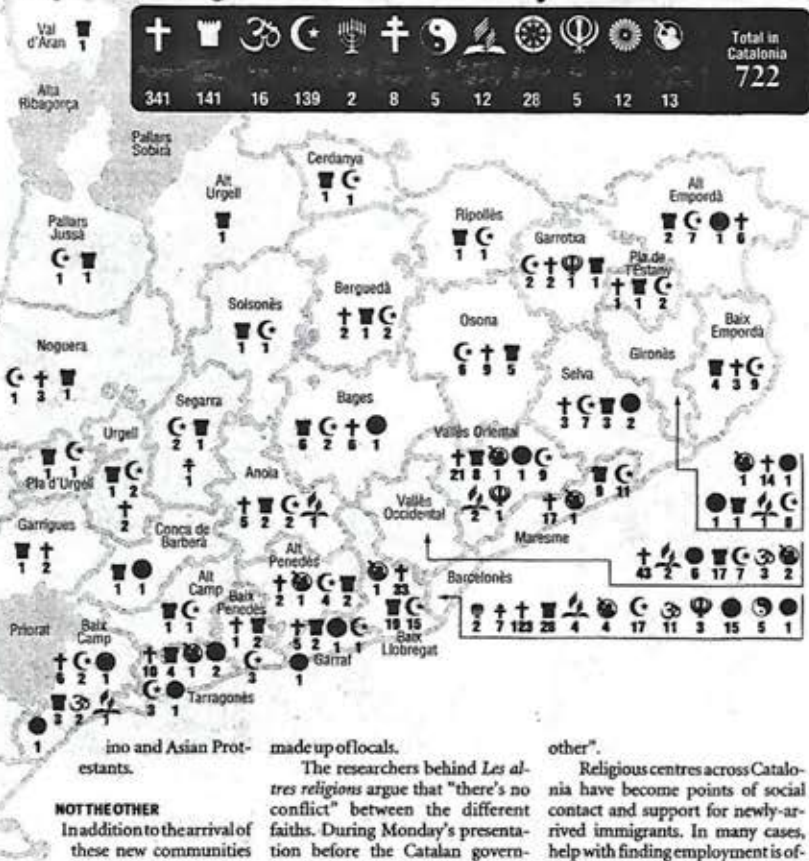
field work of Joan Gómez, Maria del Mar Giera and Agustí Iglesias of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona's centre for Investigations en Sociologia de la Religió (ISOR).

It shows that "in a society prone to secularisation", the number of alternatives to the dominant religion — in this case Roman Catholicism — increases.

The arrival of immigrants to Catalonia is the key to this new diverse landscape of faiths. The new centres for religious practice are located in counties with the highest concentration of foreigners. The county of Barcelona leads the way, with 222 houses of worship, followed by Vallès Occidental (80), Baix Llobregat (68) Vallès Oriental (43) and El Maresme (38).

Estruch points out that the new influx of immigrants has not only increased the size of the Muslim community, but it has also been a source of new Jewish enclaves, carried over especially from Argentina and the rest of Latin America, as well as developing communities of Lat-

## Map of the religious centres of minority faiths in Catalonia



### NOT THE OTHER

In addition to the arrival of these new communities to Catalonia, the sociologists observed a fairly new phenomenon in Catalan society: the conversion of native Catalans to minority religions. The study found Hindu and Buddhist organisations

made up of locals.

The researchers behind *Les altres religions* argue that "there's no conflict" between the different faiths. During Monday's presentation before the Catalan government, the sociologists defended these faiths' "legitimacy". "It is accepted that there is not only one religion [in Catalonia]," Estruch said. He then went on to insist that these groups not be looked upon as "The

other".

Religious centres across Catalonia have become points of social contact and support for newly-arrived immigrants. In many cases, help with finding employment is offered. Contrary to the theories of isolationism often sprung on these communities, the study found that many of the centres promote outreach with the greater Catalan society, and even integration. Some or-

ganisations such as the Centre UNESCO de Catalunya work towards keeping these lines of communication open.

### WHO ARE THEY?

Protestants are characterised by their diversity. Some of the distinctive communities within the broad-way umbrella of Protestantism include la Església (Church) Filadèlfia, whose 69 places of worship are attended by a total of 6,000 Gypsies. Then there are Baptist and Anglican churches, among other Christian factions, most of which grew out of immigration from one hundred years ago.

Islam has seen an important growth because of immigration occurring now. It is relatively new to the area, that is since the Moors' expulsion from Spain by Queen Isabella. In addition to immigrant Muslim communities, there are three Sufi associations formed by locals who converted to the faith.

Centres for Jehovah's Witnesses are numerous and can be found all around Catalonia, just like the houses of worship for Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons, movements that both started in the United States.

Up until recently, Barcelona was home to just two functioning Jewish synagogues, where the Conservative and Progressive congregations prayed separately. But a third faction of Lubovich, or Orthodox Jews, has developed. Not to mention the site of the ancient synagogue in the Gothic quarter.

Members of the Christian Orthodox communities are spread out in three groups between Barcelona and Girona. Believers in the Baha'i faith are few, as the movement is very new to Catalonia. The country's Sikhs live in Garrotxa and Barcelona, and the Hindus, Buddhists and Taoists are mostly of Asian origin.

The research team did not, however, take into account religious movements such as Christian Scientology — founded by the American L. Ron Hubbard — or the Unification Church — created by the Korean Reverend Moon.

### A MAP OF RELIGIONS FOR A SECULAR CATALAN GOVERNMENT

The study on religions, which was launched by the former director of Religious Affairs of the Catalan government, Ignasi Garcia-Clavel, will become a key element in the new government's policymaking.

Montserrat Coll, the current director of Religious Affairs, took the opportunity to express her commitment to helping maintaining good relations between the different groups.



A Muslim mosque in the neighbourhood of Rocafonda in Mataró opened its doors to Catholics in early November / OROLDURAN