

Article

The Swiss Religious Governance Model: Legal, Political and Cultural Impediments to the Integration of Diversity

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Abstract

Switzerland does not have an established religion; however, the system of cantonal recognition is in many respects indistinguishable. In most countries the established religion receives state aid; similarly in Switzerland, the recognised denominations of Christianity receive extensive financial and other social capital benefits. Both the established religions of western liberal countries with such a system and the recognised religions in Switzerland are experiencing rapid declines in membership due to immigration, secularisation and individuation. Recognition, unlike establishment, is not a formal acknowledgement of a religion as part of state governance. Whereas establishment is still broadly accepted amongst those nations with an establishment regime, questioning of the legitimacy of the recognition system is rising quickly. The recognition system is theoretically more flexible than establishment, but it has not proven so in reality. This article draws upon interdisciplinary research and original research to investigate the challenges of adapting the recognition system to the changing landscape and examines the impact of attempts to overcome the constraints of the recognition rules. It suggests that a better understanding of the similarity between establishment and recognition coupled with greater awareness of the hegemony of Christianity in the political discourse and cultural symbolism of Switzerland might facilitate greater possibilities of adaptation.

Keywords: state-religion; religious governance; diversity; establishment; recognition; Switzerland

1. Introduction

This investigation was triggered by a doctoral thesis exploring the Swiss federal constitutional provision that religion was primarily a matter for the cantons, legislation that appeared anachronistic in the light of modern national religious diversity resulting from increased migration. It investigates the legal framework of “recognition” that elevates the recognised churches, the “*landeskirchen*”, to a similar status. Despite a rapid decline in membership *landeskirchen* remain the sole beneficiaries of a system of church taxes imposed by the state that places them in a highly privileged position amongst religious organisations. An examination of the political and cultural landscapes affirms that, contrary to the consensus narrative of separation of church and state, Christianity has a unique role within Switzerland.

There is no established religion in Switzerland “established by law as the only official religion of a state” ([Merriam-Webster n.d.-a](#)). However, a system of state recognition of religious organisations exists that confers similar or greater financial and social privileges than those enjoyed by established religions in countries with such a regime. This article describes the recognition system, the benefits granted, and the consequences of the system



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upon the Swiss religious landscape. It also considers the paradox that some of the schemes intended to ameliorate the inequality between recognised and unrecognised religions may inadvertently re-enforce it.

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining historical, legal and political sources with firsthand observation of the Swiss contemporary religious landscape and perspectives gained during interviews with religious leaders and state administrators as part of a doctoral research programme. It concludes that the failure to acknowledge the similarity between recognition and establishment is adversely impacting the adaptation of governance to the dramatic changes occurring in the religious landscape. Two Christian denominations (Catholicism and the Swiss Reformed Evangelical Church) are recognised in 16 cantons, and a third (old Catholicism) in eight ([Institut für Religionsrecht n.d.](#)). They are the sole beneficiaries of public recognition apart from Judaism in five cantons,¹ impacting the adaptation of governance to the dramatic changes occurring in the religious landscape. It will be posited that Christianity is so entrenched that it has become conflated with Swiss identity and that this has contributed to the inability to address structural inequality within Switzerland's religious landscape. Further, that a stasis in religious governance has occurred because of a lack of understanding of the power of the recognition regime as quasi-establishment and the role of Christianity in Swiss identity.

2. Swiss Religious Governance

The modern Swiss federal constitution, first enacted in 1848, sought to create a unified state and ensure peace after the ending of the last of five cantonal civil wars, fought, nominally at least, in the name of religion². Whilst the creation of the Confederation coincided with the hegemonic rise of the nation state ([Zimmer 2003](#)), a persistent collective memory of cleavage between Catholic and Protestant cantons endures. For example, the Roman Catholic Church was publicly recognised as a religion by Zürich as recently as 1963 ([Kanton Zürich 1963](#)). There have been several revisions to the 1848 Constitution, but the influence of earlier divisive narratives that lasted throughout the nineteenth century can still be detected ([Forclaz 2007](#)).

Two articles of the Federal Constitution ([FedEx 1999](#)) regulate religion in Switzerland; Article 15 provides for freedom of conscience and religion, and Article 72 governs the relationship between church and state; neither stipulates any single religion or religious organisation as having a special status in affiliation to or as part of the state. Article 72 sets out a division of religious governance between different levels of government; primary responsibility lying with the cantons (72(1)), and only a reserve responsibility for keeping religious peace lies with the Federation (72(2)).

Swiss governance operates at three distinctive levels, federal, cantonal and the local *Gemeinden*³ ([Linder and Mueller 2021](#)). Residual sovereignty lies with the cantons, limited only by power that has been transferred to the Confederation ([FedEx 1999](#), 3bV), and they remain a powerful source of legitimation and sovereignty ([Church 2004](#); [Vatter 2018](#); [Egli 2020](#)). However, there are strong vertical and horizontal connections between and within the different layers that are an essential part of the Swiss governmental process ([Vatter 2018](#)), and in reality, religion is one of the few areas in which the cantons retain almost complete sovereignty ([Pahud de Mortanges 2020](#)). Historic cantonal conflict has resulted in the Federation remaining hesitant in becoming involved in, or being seen to be engaged with, any form of religious governance.

3. The Absence of “Establishment” in the German Religious Lexicon

An established church is “a church recognised by law as the official church of a nation or state and supported by civil authority” ([Merriam-Webster n.d.-a](#)). Oxford Reference elaborates further,

the State recognises it as having a unique or superior claim to the allegiance of the population in religious matters. However, there is no precise line to be drawn between established churches and those which have some other form of special status. ([Oxford Reference n.d.](#))

The oft-cited paradigm of an established church is the Church of England; defined by the Act of Supremacy in 1534, declaring King Henry VIII as its head. However, the modern Church of England also provides an unusual example of the consequences of establishment. Its status as the established church is unchallenged, but no obligation exists upon the government to provide funding, nor is there a tax that raises revenue in its name. It relies instead upon income generated from assets seized and given to it at the time of its creation in 1534, alongside voluntary charitable donations ([Church of England 2024](#)). A contrasting example can be found in Denmark, Section 4 of the Danish Constitution specifically obligates the state to support the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, declared to be the recognised church ([Denmark 1965](#)).

The terms “established church” or “established religion” do not even exist in German.⁴ The phrase “*etablierte Kirche*” is occasionally used colloquially, but there is no entry for this term, or for “*etablierte Religion*”, in the two most authoritative German dictionaries, the [Grimm and Grimm \(1854–1960\)](#) or the Oxford University Press and Dudenverlag ([Thyen et al. 2005](#)) dictionary. The Langenscheidt Encyclopedic Dictionary ([Langenscheidt 2018](#)) includes the entry “*etablieren*” as a reflexive verb; thus, “*etablieren sich*” means “to establish oneself” and “*etablisement*” means “establishment”, but the contextual examples cited are a shop or a restaurant. No reference to religions or any suggestion of use of the term appears in the context of religious, societal or normative standards or behaviour. The term “established church” does not appear in the Swiss federal or any cantonal constitution.

4. The *Landeskirchen*

In the absence of an established church, “*landeskirchen*” (literal translation “churches of the area”) are a defining feature of the religious landscape. As explained below, the term denotes far more than the literal translation. It will be argued here that, although conceptually different, *landeskirchen* are the *de facto* equivalent of an established church. *Landeskirchen* first appeared in the decades leading up to the Reformation, funded by the locally wealthy to assist their communities ([MacCulloch 2004](#)). Although they were religious institutions from the outset, their authority was conciliar, drawing upon the authority of the local government and Princes as well as the church. They never functioned merely as local branches of the centralised church ([MacCulloch 2004](#)). However, unlike established churches in other countries, they have never been formally declared to be part of either the Federation or any canton.

In modern Switzerland the term *landeskirchen* is used in two distinctive ways. The narrow use is as a legal term describing those churches recognised in the canton in which they are present. Cantonal constitutions stipulate that *landeskirchen* are the sole recipients of taxes levied to support religious organisations that are telling called “*kirchensteuern*” (Church taxes) rather than “*religionssteuern*” (religion taxes). The wider modern colloquial usage is to describe those churches perceived to be part of the local cultural heritage that form part of the matrix of secular power and control within its geographic domain.

5. Recognition

The state legitimacy conferred by recognition has important financial and symbolic as well as legal implications. Legally, a church recognised as a *landeskirchen* becomes an entitled recipient of church tax revenues. Symbolically, it is an acknowledgement of belonging, and of alignment with the prevailing local power structure, even if not expressly stated to be a part of it. It is also viewed as affirmation of a church as a constituent of the identity and cultural heritage of the country or region.

Benefits of accumulation of social capital also follow. Precise definitions of “social capital”, and variants of it, are much-discussed and contested academic terms. It can, however, be stated with confidence that recognition brings with it substantial benefits in widely acknowledged forms of social capital such as networking and access to and attribution of power. Thus, many church organisations choose to include the term *landeskirchen* in their name to underscore their status. For example, the full name of the Graubünden branch of the *Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche Schweiz* (EVREF) is the *Evangelische reformierte Landeskirche des Kantons Graubünden* (Evangelical Reformed **Regional Church** of Graubünden) (my emphasis). This is not intended deliberately to exclude those without such status, but its unnecessary inclusion incidentally emphasises the gap between recognised and unrecognised religions.

The requirements for public recognition vary in detail from canton to canton but typically include conditions such as an extended presence in the canton. Application requires lengthy and detailed documentation, including audits of their accounting and governance systems. These demands are entirely reasonable, as an organisation seeking to benefit from publicly raised taxes is required to achieve the same standards as other public bodies. However, satisfying such requirements often requires extensive time and professional input. This creates an obstacle for unrecognised religions, often relatively recently arrived in Switzerland and with a high percentage of immigrant members. They are likely not to have acquired the earning power to finance the resources required to complete an application for recognition. They are therefore trapped in a cycle of lacking the resources to apply for the recognised status that would provide precisely the financing and social capital benefits required to address their challenges.

Some cantons have sought to mitigate the difficulties of recognition attainment by developing a second level of “private” or “small” recognition to broaden its base. This offers some of the benefits to organisations struggling to meet the rigorous criteria for full public recognition. Two Jewish communities have been privately recognised in Zürich since 2007, as are two Alevi communities and three smaller Christian denominations in Basel-Stadt.⁵ Private recognition of communities rather than religions can also overcome obstacles to recognition that may exist within the communities themselves.⁶ However, proposals to introduce private recognition in other cantons have proven controversial. It has been portrayed as unnecessary in a country with individual religious freedom and risking recognition of communities that may not fully share Swiss values ([Freethinkers Association of Switzerland 2018](#)).

As recognition does not entail the merger of state and religion, it can theoretically be withdrawn at any time without existential change to the state; it has greater conceptual flexibility than a process of establishment. However, with the exception of Judaism, public recognition has never been granted to any religion other than Christianity, nor has it ever been withdrawn in any canton. No Muslim organisations or Orthodox Christian churches have been recognised to date, despite both now being significant actors in Switzerland’s religious landscape.⁷ In practice the Swiss recognition system has proven to be as permanent, and as exclusive, as established religions in other countries.

6. Declining *Landeskirchen* Membership

The recognition model reflects the nineteenth century reality of overwhelmingly Christian Switzerland; far different from the present landscape. Those declaring themselves to be Christian has fallen from 97.5% of the population in 1970 to 56% in 2023, whilst those claiming no religious affiliation has risen from 1.2% to 35.6% ([Federal Statistical Office 2025](#)). Traditional attendance at religious services including prayer has dropped from 46.8% in 2014 to 39.5% in 2024, whilst there has been a rise in those who engage with books and magazines or online about “spiritual” matters from 12.8% of the population in 1970 to 19.6% in 2023 ([Federal Statistical Office 2025](#)).

The profile of those maintaining formal religious affiliation has also changed. In 1970 5.3% of the population belonged to non-recognised religions or Christian denominations, by 2023 this had risen to 13.1% ([Federal Statistical Office 2025](#)). In the latest [Federal Statistical Office \(2025\)](#) survey only 42.9% of the population declared allegiance to the *landeskirchen*, although the *landeskirchen* continue to benefit from 100% of the money raised through church taxes ([Peter and Zug 2024](#)). State awareness of the need to respond to change has grown, for example, the website of Bern’s Directorate of Home Affairs and Justice has a page discussing this topic ([Kanton Bern 2018, n.d.](#)), however, at the time of writing, the only regulatory change has been the handful of examples of private recognition described above.

The enhanced financial and social capital privileges enjoyed by recognised religions remain largely untouched despite falling representation within wider society coming under increased scrutiny. Several cantons have “round tables” (*Runder Tische*), forums for dialogue between religion and state. Following the model of state religious neutrality, all participating religious organisations are theoretically equal. Nevertheless, the voice of the *landeskirchen*, distinguished by their formal legal status, is likely to carry greater weight than those of non-recognised religions. There has even been an example of enhanced Federation perception as a *landeskirchen*. The announcement of a call for peace in Ukraine in 2022 cited the three publicly recognised churches as partners and implicit legitimators of their stance. No mention was made of any other religious organisation ([Swiss Federal Chancellery 2022](#)). The distinction between recognised and unrecognised churches may also affect interreligious perception or can even cause divisions within the same religion. For example, the principal national Christian platform for interdenominational relations is the Association of Christian Churches in Switzerland (AGCK). Despite its ecumenical mandate, it distinguishes between the recognised national churches as one group and unrecognised members such as the Orthodox churches and free churches ([Kirchen n.d.](#)).

Cantons have adopted several strategies in order to address concerns of inequality. The introduction of a second tier of “private” recognition was one described earlier. Another is the designation of church tax revenues for the benefit of non-recognised religions, but this is raising new difficulties. As *landeskirchen* are constitutionally designated as the sole beneficiaries of church taxes, receipts still have to flow through them even if others benefit to some extent. Thus, the effect of such schemes is to instrumentalise the *landeskirchen* as proxy state vehicles for their own policy objectives. The recent scandals surrounding alleged systematic abuse and cover-ups in the Catholic Church ([Riklin 2015](#); [Bradley 2023](#)) and the Evangelical Reformed Church ([Swissinfo 2024](#)) have led to questioning of the suitability of *landeskirchen* as agents of state governance ([Riklin 2015](#); [Bradley 2023](#); [Swissinfo 2024](#)). To date, suggestions that this must be changed have not been widely pursued and remain muted but might gain traction if new accusations emerge.

A closer look at a pioneering example of seeking to divert church taxes to an unrecognised religion evidences well the difficulties encountered. The *Qualitätsicherung Muslimische Seelsorge Zürich* (Quality Control of Muslim Pastoral Care Zürich; QUaMS) was initiated in Zürich in 2017. The scheme, popular within the Muslim community, aims to train Muslims

in pastoral care and provide certification of compliance with Swiss standards. QUaMS was funded by a six-year programme instituted by the canton of Zürich which allocated CHF 50 million per annum to social programmes. Less publicised is that only CHF 12 million pa was allocated to non-recognised religions ([Kathbern n.d.](#)) and that supervision and distribution of the funds must be via the recognised churches. Church representatives sit on the QuaMS supervisory board to monitor expenditure and standards of instruction and achievement. The *landeskirchen* are effectively agents of the state ([Nau.ch 2025](#)). In this case, through no fault of either state or any religion, a well-intentioned scheme has embedded an unequal relationship between the recognised and non-recognised religions. The *landeskirchen* perform roles as state supervisors and administrators alongside their roles of interreligious sponsorship. Furthermore, the scheme creates an optically challenging narrative; of *landeskirchen* devoting funds and energy to the promotion of other religions ([Swiss Catholic News 2024](#); [Swissinfo 2025](#)).

7. The State–Church Enterprise of Church Tax as a Barrier to Diversity

The Swiss *landeskirchen* enjoy a state-sponsored funding regime similar to that of many established churches other than the Church of England, drawing revenue from taxes. Periodic questioning of the desirability or fairness of the system of church taxes has arisen, even prior to the recent focus on church scandals ([Keim 2020](#)). Concerns included church members fearing it as a deterrence to church membership ([SRF 2017](#)), or that it is contrary to ethical pluralism, and that those granted funding may even pursue practices counter to the values of the secular society that funds them ([Pacillo 2016](#)). Supporters of the system reply that secular state oversight (in the case of Switzerland, through cantonal recognition) ensures compliance with normative societal values ([SRF 2017](#)).

Such is the complexity of detailed regulation of church–state law that no publication is available that sets out all the rules in every canton; an Institute for Religious Law ([Institut für Religionsrecht n.d.](#)) has been created at the University of Fribourg dedicated to researching the topic. Cantonal practices vary in almost every aspect of church tax regulation, in some cases reflecting different philosophical approaches to church–state relations. For example, some cantons include corporations in the net for religious tax collection, others exclude them. Church taxes may be collected separately or included in the general cantonal tax bill, and practice varies as to whether the tax is collected by the canton or by the churches. Historically, in several cantons the clergy of recognised churches were cantonal employees paid directly by the canton; it is now more common, although not universal, to give the churches responsibility for budgeting and fund distribution. Nevertheless, some cantons choose to remain involved in determining church expenditure priorities. In all cases each topic is a matter for negotiation, as are the issues of help for unrecognised religions. Mention should also be made that the national landscape includes national Swiss organisations campaigning against church taxes such as the [Freethinkers Association of Switzerland \(n.d.\)](#) and a commercial organisation that provides a comprehensive guide to church taxes in each canton and a service to assist in achieving exemption from church taxes ([Kirchenaustritte Schwiez n.d.](#)).

The complexity of 26 differing tax regimes is a barrier for unrecognised religions unable to fund extensive professional resources to navigate them. The common feature is that church taxes are a joint enterprise between the state and the recognised churches, providing the dominant form of financing and support of religion in Switzerland.

8. Christianity in the Swiss Political Discourse

Two contradictory narratives in Swiss politics affirm Christianity as a quasi-established religion. Centrist politicians have sought to distance themselves from their Christian roots

in order to increase their appeal in a more secular society. In making this conscious choice they have inadvertently highlighted the historic centrality of Christianity. Simultaneously, the right-wing populist movement that has been highly successful in recent decades is loudly proclaiming its legitimacy as grounded in Christianity. Both decisions, to not omit Christianity and to emphasise it, have increased the degree to which it is seen as part of the bricolage of the modern secular state.

The largest centrist political party is The Centre Party (*Die Mitte*), formed in 2021 by an alliance of the former Christian Democratic Party (*Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei der Schweiz*, CVP) and the Conservative Democratic Party (*Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei*, BDP). The CVP advocated values based on Christian teachings throughout its existence (Altermatt 2018). The BDP emerged in 2008 as a centrist split from the Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*, SVP). The SVP's advocacy of the role of Christianity in politics is described below. When The Centre Party was founded reference to "Christian" in its name or material was omitted, but not without vocal opposition (Aargauer Zeitung 2020). The Centre Party shifted its narrative from religious towards generalised humanistic values. For example, it now seeks legitimacy for its approach to migration on the basis of "a humane migration policy that upholds Switzerland's **humanitarian tradition**" (*Die Mitte* n.d.—my emphasis). However, its Christian heritage can still be seen in the membership of the 18-member Bundesrat cross-party Christ + Politik group in the federal Parliament which includes eight members of The Centre Party (Swiss Parliament n.d.).

The SVP is currently the largest party in the National Council (the lower house of the Federal Parliament), with 62 of the 200 seats. Its contrasting approach can be seen in its 2023–2027 party manifesto of the SVP, Free and Safe (*Frei und Sicher*), which contains three sets of references to Christianity. The first states that "Our country and our culture are shaped by Christianity. Freedom of belief and religion are inherent in Switzerland, as long as they do not conflict with our values, which shape our understanding of the state and our legal system" (SVP Schweiz 2023, p. 10). Another passage asserts the special place of Christianity in Swiss identity, glossing over any issues of denominational cleavage:

The separation of church and state must not obscure the fact that a Christian-influenced view of society and humanity is of great importance for Swiss culture and politics. Furthermore, the Protestant work ethic is the foundation of an entrepreneurial and performance-oriented society. We draw rational thinking, creativity, and innovation from these Western Christian principles. [...] the Catholic concept of subsidiarity and the emphasis on the value of the individual within creation have also been and continue to be formative for Switzerland and Swiss federalism. (SVP Schweiz 2023, pp. 166–68).

The SVP appears to favour a reductionist form of ecumenicalism in order to strengthen Christianity as a source of legitimation. Some Catholics with ultramontane leanings may be surprised by the emphasis on individualism.⁸

The unique role of Christianity in Swiss politics is further demonstrated by the presence of two other smaller political parties that advocate a specifically Barthian view of connectedness between secular and religious aspects of life. The Evangelical People's Party (*Evangelische Volkspartei der Schweiz*, EVP), founded in 1919, holds two seats in the National Council. It is headquartered in the same building as the religious organisation of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance but has never gained significant influence across the wider Protestant spectrum. The second is the Federal Democratic Union (*Eidgenössisch-Demokratische Union*, EDU), also with two seats in the National Council, founded in 1975. Its website identifies it as fundamentalist; "a movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles" (Merriam-Webster n.d.-b). The landing page has a declaration that, "The EDU advocates for an order based on biblical principles. [...] thinking, speaking,

and acting in faith and trust in Jesus Christ and the Bible as God’s Word” ([Eidgenössisch-Demokratische Union n.d.](#)), and is illustrated with a picture of Jesus on the cross and a quote from John 1:17b, “Grace became truth through Jesus Christ”.

Thus, the three populist parties and The Centre Party, four in total, of the 12 parties currently represented in the Swiss Parliament, including the largest and third-largest parties in the National Council, have either accorded a central role to Christianity historically or now or explicitly invoke it as a guiding principle in the formulation of their secular state policies.

An examination of the allegiances of individual members of the national parliament also reveals a powerful Christian influence. Parliamentary representatives are not required to disclose their religion or denomination. However, there have been several unofficial polls of Swiss parliament members, for example, by the NZZ in 2017 ([Swissinfo 2017b](#)) and more recently of the current parliament ([Bärlocher 2023](#)). In a culture that is normally hesitant about public declarations of religion the response rate to the 2017 survey was surprisingly good. In total, 235 of the 246 members of the two houses of the Federal Parliament responded. The 2023 survey, whilst valuable as a more recent study, had a significantly lower response rate; only 146 members (59%). Coincidentally, the percentage that responded is close to percentage of the populus (56%) that identified religion or spirituality as important in the most recent Federal Statistical Office survey ([Federal Statistical Office 2025](#)).

Federal politicians who answered both surveys overwhelmingly identified Christianity as their faith—as almost twice as high as the number of people they represent ([Swissinfo 2017a](#); [Bärlocher 2023](#)). A more recent study by [Polit-Forum Bern \(2025\)](#) confirms the findings of Christian overrepresentation amongst politicians compared with their electorate; 75% of the parliamentarians identified as members of either the EVREF or the Roman Catholic Church, compared with 50.2% of the population ([Federal Statistical Office n.d.](#)). Non-recognised religions, particularly Muslims who form 6% of the population, are underrepresented with only three parliamentarians (just over 1% of federal Parliament members).

The data in all three surveys may be affected by sample bias and must be read cautiously. It is possible, certainly in the latter two surveys, that only those holding significant religious views responded. Religion is likely to be of less significance to agnostics or atheists, so they may not have taken part in the surveys.

9. Christianity in State Symbolism

The importance of symbolism and ritual as part of nationhood and national identity has long been recognised ([Anderson 1983](#)). The preamble to the Swiss Federal Constitution ([FedEx 1999](#)), despite periodic debates suggesting its deletion ([Le News 2021](#)), remained unchanged since its adoption in 1848: “In the name of God Almighty!”. Despite similar intermittent calls for the removal of similar phraseology in cantonal constitutions 16 of the 26 cantons retain explicit references to a monotheistic “God” in their preambles (Appendix 4. [Kropf and Borlat Zürcher 2017](#)).

Flags play an important role in shaping national identity ([Jaskulowski 2016](#)) and evoke associations with national and cultural contexts as well as history ([Schatz and Lavine 2007](#); [Becker et al. 2017](#)). A cross appears in the national flag, as well as in the cantonal flags of Neuchâtel (*laïcité* notwithstanding), Graubünden, and Schwyz. The key of Saint Peter can be seen on the flags of Geneva (again, despite *laïcité*), Obwalden, and Nidwalden. A bishop’s staff is depicted on the flags of both Basel-Landschaft and Jura, and a converted monk (Saint Fridolin) features on the flag of Glarus. Thus, the national flag and those of 10 of the 26 cantons contain Christian symbols.

Christianity also has a prominent role in the Swiss national anthem, another important symbol of national identity (Erden 2019). In 1894 the Federal Council initiated the first of several searches for a suitable candidate; the Swiss Psalm was not designated as a national anthem until 1961. It was permanently adopted in 1981 despite opposition claiming that it was too “religious” (Swiss National Library n.d.). The text heavily reflects its religious origins, composed by a Cistercian monk in 1841 and based upon Psalm 18, entitled *Diligam te Domine* (I love you, Lord) (Swiss National Library n.d.). “God” appears three times in the first verse and “Lord” once. God also features twice in each of the second, third, and fourth verses, and both the “loving Father” and heaven are also included in the second verse.

As with the legal framework of recognition and political discourse, religious state symbolism challenges the claim of separation of state and religion in Switzerland and suggestion that the religious playing field is an equal one. Christianity, denominational cleavage notwithstanding, is in a privileged position.

The dominant presence of Christianity in politics or symbolism does not prove that it is an established religion as part of the state, but it does lend evidential weight to this being the case.

10. The Conflation of Identity and the Recognised Religion in the Swiss Cultural Landscape

The Federal Palace in Bern is an iconic part of the country’s architectural and cultural heritage, and it frequently appears as a backdrop in national news stories. The large golden cross that surmounts the dome may barely register in the minds of viewers but it subliminally messages Christianity as an essential source of the normative values of national governance. In another symbol of the conflation of Christianity and Swiss identity crosses can also be found at the summits of numerous Swiss mountains. Crucifixes in classrooms have been the subject of litigation in several European countries⁹ and were banned by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court (1990) as violating religious neutrality. However, enthusiasm for enforcement varies amongst the cantons, and they still feature in many classrooms unless a specific complaint has been made (Swissinfo 2009). The freedom to wear and display publicly religious symbols such as crosses and crucifixes remains similarly problematic throughout Europe. Switzerland is one of 13 European countries to have banned the burqa following a national referendum in 2021.¹⁰

One aspect of the regulation of religious symbolism remains unique to Switzerland. A national referendum held in 2009 which attracted worldwide attention resulted in Article 72(3) in the Federal Constitution that prohibits the construction of new minarets.¹¹ The proponents’ predominant justification for a ban was that minarets were a symbol of an alien identity and authority that contradicted national culture. Whilst the claim to symbolism is historically accurate (Bloom 1989), interpretation as hostile to the endogenous culture is subjective. This interpretation was one amongst several divisive narratives advanced during the referendum campaign (Baumann 2009; Antonsich and Jones 2010; Mayer 2009). The ban differs from other religious restrictions that are typically connected to practices that re-enforce personal identity such as praxis or education. In the case of minarets an impersonal communal symbol is targeted in order to prevent an alleged assault on the endogenous religion and culture by one perceived to be exogenous and hostile.

The importance of architecture as a vehicle for messages of religious power and influence is well documented (Green 2010; Barrie 2021). The contrast between the limitation on minarets and the dominance of churches in most towns and villages, typically regarded as part of the secular cultural as well as religious heritage, further evidences Christianity’s special status. Mountains and valleys provide the perfect echo chamber in a country “where church bells ring every quarter of an hour in almost every Swiss town and village, around

the clock” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2009, p. 225). As with the cross on the Federal Palace and other symbols, full understanding of the degree to which Christianity has become a part of Swiss identity has been sublimated through familiarity. Churches and church bells are perceived to be more than a statement of Christian presence, they are seen as an integral part of the Alpine vignette.

Christianity has been established in Switzerland over centuries and, with the exception of Judaism, most other religions have been present for only a few decades. In consequence, a contrast can be found in many towns between magnificent churches in the best locations and non-Christian places of worship scattered in industrial areas, disused railway sidings, or even former church community halls. This inequality is changing gradually as the more recently arrived religions establish themselves and are able to afford better premises. However, the lack of state funding for newly arrived and unrecognised religions is slowing progress. The messaging of inequality between the recognised and non-recognised religions is sometimes inadvertently reinforced in unintended ways. For example, for convenience and in order to accommodate larger numbers, well-intentioned interfaith meetings often take place in churches. Adherents of unrecognised religions travelling to these meetings in churches from their own small premises, often located in a side street in the cheapest neighborhood, are likely to notice the contrast.

Another common feature of the Swiss cultural landscape is the signs on the main roads into many towns and villages that announce the service times of the locally recognised local religions. The image at the top of the signs is usually a cross on a circle, widely regarded as a symbol of Christian ecumenicism, but only details of the services of recognised denominations are given. Many local newspapers also publish free official notices with details of the services of recognised Christian denominations but not those of denominations of other faiths.¹² Even in those cantons where Judaism is recognised, only Christian services are announced, possibly in this case as the times of Jewish services vary according to the season.

Recognised churches also receive preferential television media treatment. The state-run Swiss Radio Television (SRF) broadcasts a weekly Saturday evening slot at 20.00 entitled “Word for Sunday”, described as “a commentary from a Christian perspective on religious, spiritual, and ethical issues” (SRF n.d.). However, only representatives of the recognised denominations are invited to participate. SRF broadcasts programmes about other denominations and religions that are formatted as special feature broadcasts rather than portrayed as an integral part of Swiss culture. Whilst apparently a part of inclusion and tolerance, the difference in approach toward unrecognised Christian denominations and religions may be contributing to othering of them.

11. Conclusions

There is no legally declared established state religion in Switzerland, and for historical reasons, primary responsibility for religious administration has been assigned to the cantons. An exact equivalent of the term “established church” does not exist in German, but *landeskirchen* describes religious organisations legally recognised by the state; the term also has a wider colloquial meaning of cultural affiliation and belonging. With two exceptions, all of the cantons grant status and substantial financial benefits through a system of state recognition that has benefited only two denominations in 16 cantons, and a third in eight. With the exception of Judaism in five cantons, Christianity remains the only publicly recognised religion, and only recognised denominations receive the proceeds of church state taxes. This has perpetuated the inequality of recognised churches receiving religious tax revenues, whilst unrecognised churches and religions only receive indirectly a small fraction of the funding raised. A system of limited private recognition has been introduced

in some cantons to ameliorate the difficulty, but expansion of this solution has proven problematic. Some cantons have developed various programmes to mitigate religious inequalities and facilitate integration. However, these have inadvertently potentially widened the gap still further between recognised religions and the rest. Swiss religious governance requires further adaptation to cope with rapid change in the religious landscape. Greater acknowledgement of the consequences of the recognition system and of its similarity to establishment might help to facilitate better accommodation of modern diversity.

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Notes

- ¹ Basel-Stadt, Bern, Fribourg, St. Gallen and Vaud.
- ² Catholicism and Protestantism were often merely practical labels adopted by the cantons for competing political or economic groups and not the result of a genuine theological debate (Church and Head 2013).
- ³ The closest Anglo-Saxon equivalent are boroughs or municipalities, but they are viewed as retaining more independent power due to their vestigial sovereign role within a federal rather than centralised system (Fachhochschule Graubünden n.d.), hence using the Swiss name rather than a translation.
- ⁴ Although Switzerland has four official languages German is the first or joint first official language in 19 of the 26 cantons.
- ⁵ The Evangelical Lutheran Church on 14 January 2021, the Alevis on 17 October 2012, the New Apostolic Church on 11 January 2012 and the Christian Community on 8 September 2010 (Kanton Basel-Stadt 2025).
- ⁶ For example, Basel-Stadt wished to avoid involvement in the controversy between its Alevi communities over the Turkish twentieth century political approach to Islam (Massicard 2011).
- ⁷ Muslims constituted 6% of the population in 2023. Orthodox Christianity is listed as part of “other denominations” rather than separately in federal statistics, in total membership of Christian denominations other than the recognised ones is estimated at 5.8% of the population (Federal Statistical Office n.d.).
- ⁸ The Jesuits were banned by the 1848 modern Federal Constitution until 1973 on grounds of alleged divided loyalty between the Pope and the new Swiss federal state.
- ⁹ The legal situation in this area is complex and technical. For example, in European Court of Human Rights (2011), the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that crucifixes are a passive symbol and do not constitute indoctrination. However, in the Crucifix Decision (Bundesverfassungsgericht 1995), the German Federal Constitutional Court annulled a Bavarian law requiring crucifixes in classrooms, arguing that it violated Article 4 of the Basic Law, which guarantees freedom of religion. In a case involving Switzerland, European Court of Human Rights (2001), the ECHR upheld a ban on headscarves for female teachers, arguing that wearing a headscarf could influence students’ attitudes toward their religious beliefs.
- ¹⁰ The others are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden.
- ¹¹ The four minarets erected in Switzerland before the ban remain in place.

- ¹² In an interview with Satish Joshi, president of the Swiss Umbrella Association for Hinduism, he described the rejection by Zürich local newspapers of his request to publish the times of Hindu services alongside announcements of Christian services. He was told that they would only be included if he paid for private advertisements (interview with Mark Fox, 5 October 2023. Transcript available).

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