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Some religions are more welcome than others

If you're a Sikh, Hindu or Buddhist in Switzerland and want to build a temple, no problem; if you're a Muslim and want to put up a minaret, you'd better start praying. For while some non-native religions have proved easy bedfellows for the Swiss, others - notably Islam - have found it more difficult to be accepted, so



The Sikh temple in Langenthal was built along traditional lines

much so in the case of Islam that Swiss Muslims currently face the prospect of seeing the construction of minarets put to a nationwide vote.

The rightwing campaign to ban minarets, launched with October's parliamentary elections in mind, follows local opposition in a handful of Swiss-German towns. One of these, Wangen in canton Solothurn, lies just a few kilometres from the Wat Thai centre, home of the Buddhist faith in Switzerland. Four years ago a new Buddhist temple costing SFr9 million opened on the site. Even closer to Wangen, Trimbach last year approved plans for the construction of a Hindu temple for the local Tamil community.

A similar sense of schizophrenia exists in neighbouring canton Bern where plans to construct a minaret in Langenthal ran into trouble. Langenthal is home to a sizeable Sikh temple, built in the traditional style.

While there were a few "obstacles" along the way, there

were no problems when it came to erecting the domes.

Islam is presented as the absolute opposite in religious and cultural terms to the fundamentals of Swiss and European society. There is a problem of perception post-9/11, and it is seen as a threat unlike other non-native religions.

A big increase in numbers, coupled with a failure to fully integrate, also goes against the country's Muslims. The 2000 census showed their numbers had more than doubled over the previous decade to 310'000. It is estimated that this figure now stands at around 340'000. This is part of the reason why the Swiss have a certain fear of Muslims: that too many could change the demographic balance. This is not the case with other non-native religions because their numbers are so small. At the last census there were 18'000 Jews, 21'000 Buddhists and 28'000 Hindus.

In Switzerland, only the mosques in Geneva and Zurich have a minaret, but they cannot issue the call to prayer. In addition there are around 150 "centres of worship" mainly in warehouses and old buildings, according to the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Switzerland.

Witch exonerated

Anna Göldi was executed for being a witch more than 220 years ago in Switzerland - the last witch beheaded in Europe. Now, her name is cleared. The parliament of the Swiss state of Glarus decided to exonerate Göldi as a victim of "judicial murder".

Several thousand people, mainly women, were executed for witchcraft between the 14th and 18th centuries in Europe.

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A new Swiss Saint

Pope Benedict XVI has named a new Swiss saint - the first in 60 years and the first Swiss woman to be elevated to the sainthood in modern times.

Maria Bernarda Bütler (1848-1924) was a nun who left her native Switzerland to work among the poor and disadvantaged in Latin America, setting up her own order in Ecuador and later in Colombia. She will be canonised in Rome on October 12.

Although better known for her social work, Sister Maria Bernarda had to be shown to have worked miracles to qualify for sainthood. She was beatified - the step before sainthood - by Pope John Paul II in 1995. Last summer the Vatican finally attributed a healing miracle to Sister Maria Bernarda - the curing of lung disease in a Cartagena doctor - making canonisation just a matter of time.

Verena Bütler was born in 1848 in Auw. At the age of 19 she entered the Capuchin Maria-Hilf convent in Altstätten. Just four years later - three years after taking the veil - she became mother superior. But it is the time she spent in Latin America that earned Sister Maria Bernarda recognition. Aged 40 she embarked on an adventurous journey to Ecuador, where she and six other nuns from the convent established an order devoted to teaching children and caring for the sick.

In 1895 armed conflict forced the nuns to flee to Colombia where Sister Maria Bernarda is said to have performed her miracles of healing, and where she died aged 76.

The order she founded continues to thrive, with more than 700 nuns spread out across Latin America, where they are still involved in education and health-care.

The last Swiss to be canonised was the 15th century hermit known popularly as Bruder Klaus, Niklaus von der Flüe, who was made a saint in 1947.