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Religious Minorities in the Spanish Public Sphere: Ethnographic Contributions for Improving the Public Management of Religious Diversity

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Abstract

When designing, implementing and assessing public policies, and, in particular, those affecting the public management of religious diversity, it is increasingly common to include ethnographic approaches from the field of social anthropology and the broader social sciences. Ethnographic practice can provide more representative and accurate perspectives on the actors, settings, and social phenomena subject to regulation. This article presents the findings of an ethnographic study on two minority religious communities, conducted by a team of anthropologists within the framework of a broader research project on religious freedom in Spain, led by jurists. Based on two case studies—the teaching of Evangelical religion in state schools and Islamic burial practices—our study analyses the implications of the varying degrees of public recognition, as well as how this recognition actually manifests in the everyday practice of religious groups within a context of religious diversity. The study also examines the barriers to the full participation of these communities in public institutions and civil society, as well as the discourses, strategies, and practices they develop to overcome these challenges.



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1. Introduction

Once stereotypically perceived as novel and “foreign, a consequence of immigration”, today, religious diversity is a fundamental part of Spain’s social, cultural and political context. The growing plurality of beliefs and religious practices among Spain’s heterogeneous citizenry is clearly observable in the public spaces of our towns and cities. One of the reasons for this is a legal framework based on principles of equality and non-discrimination under the auspices of the fundamental right to freedom of religion and worship, aligned with the Spanish state’s non-confessional nature and the obligation to cooperate with religious denominations, based on “positive secularism” (Contreras-Mazarío 2011, p. 35). This plurality has brought new challenges for the public management of religious diversity, particularly in terms of recognition and accommodation. These same challenges provide an insight into the changes that have taken place in Spain and the shift from a structured model based on a top-down, hierarchical and centralised model to a more horizontal and plural approach from varying levels (Astor and Griera 2016, p. 249). These improvements and developments should be seen through the lens of post-secularism, whereby pluralism becomes the axis around which a post-secular perspective is articulated, calling on society

to adopt a mutually beneficial view of the interaction between secularity and religion, rather than one rooted in mutual distrust (Ruiz-Andrés and Salguero 2025).

However, exercising religious freedom can prove a greater challenge for some religious denominations than others (Contreras-Mazarío 2013, p. 6): religious freedom is sufficiently acknowledged in Spain, but the same cannot be said of its practice. As a result, current legislation is insufficient for the effective management of a religious diversity that is radically different from that which existed in 1980, when the Organic Law on Religious Freedom (LOLR by its Spanish initials) was enacted (Amérigo 2025, p. 2). This situation is due to the State's occasional reluctance to update legislation regulating this fundamental right (Contreras-Mazarío 2020). This reticence has been perceived not only by science, but also by minority religious communities, albeit to varying degrees, in accordance with their level of recognition (Díez de Velasco 2023, p. 58), or the stereotypes and prejudices that shape the collective imaginary regarding a particular faith (Salguero 2014, p. 28). As a result, the needs of the various religious communities are at once diverse and related.

One such underlying "general issue" is the predominance of a Catholic-centric cosmic worldview (Briones 2001, p. 128). This Catholic centrism affects research through the exclusive use of its categories to analyse any form of religious expression (Frigerio 2021, p. 274). In the realm of religious governance, this worldview manifests itself through various forms of discrimination and stigmatisation towards non-Catholic religions in government discourses and practices (via laws, policies, and administrative acts that favour the Catholic religion and disadvantage others), and from several other social actors such as the press (Frigerio 2018, pp. 65–66) and digital platforms (Gervasi 2023). In Spain, Catholic centrism remains prevalent in society, often in a latent and unconscious manner, within current debates on religion (Briones 2010, p. 34). This is in line with certain reflections on post-secularism which, in addition to encouraging religious citizens and their representatives to engage in dialogue with modernity—eschewing all forms of fundamentalism—also emphasise the need for secular citizens to understand the reasons behind religious stances (Ruiz-Andrés 2022).

It is within the emic dimension of religious denominations, their communities and followers, that ethnographic practice can contribute to the analysis and improvement of religious diversity management, by highlighting the perspectives of religious actors themselves, as well as their discourses, practices and the strategies they deploy as stakeholders. The significance of this multidisciplinary approach is underscored by a growing corpus of ethnographic and sociological scholarship showing that an emic understanding of religious communities has already informed the design of inclusive policies in other settings. Studies such as Braunstein (2017) and Braunstein et al. (2017) on faith-based civic engagement in the United States, Cantori's (2021, 2022) work on Muslim charity and inclusivity, and Delehanty's (2023) analysis of faith-centred community organising all demonstrate the capacity of these perspectives to illuminate the intersections between public governance and religious diversity. Yet, such insights have scarcely been acknowledged by Spanish legal practitioners, a neglect that highlights the timeliness of the present study. In keeping with this scholarship, religious communities are understood as generators of civic capital rather than merely worshipping collectives. The literature shows how, when confronted with restrictive institutional frameworks, religious minorities mobilise relational resources, moral rhetorics and charitable practices to claim citizenship and produce public goods. Situating these dynamics within the Spanish context therefore allows us to link debates on religious governance to the international literature on faith-based activism and collective action.

Indeed, this is the principal aim of this study; namely to provide first-hand, representative information on the realities of minority religious communities, which will inform

subsequent legal approaches within a broader research framework. From there, this article shares the results of an ethnographic study conducted with two religious communities by a team of anthropologists within the context of a larger legal research project on religious freedom in the Spanish state. Specifically, and based on two case studies, it analyses the sociocultural dynamics of these communities by exploring their everyday practices, values and cultural repertoires, as well as their cultural adaptation in the public sphere. It further seeks to address the barriers that hinder the full participation of religious communities in the public domain of institutions and civil society, as well as the discourses and strategies they develop in response to these obstacles.

2. Religious Pluralism as a Symptom of Modernity in Spain

Twentieth-century secularisation theories predicted the progressive decline of religion in the public sphere, in parallel with the modernisation of societies. It was thought that this could take the form of the privatisation of religion, coupled with a semantic shift from the public to the private sphere, giving rise to “invisible religions” (Luckmann 1971); or even its disappearance due to a “crisis of credibility” brought about by pluralist conditions, whereby religion no longer legitimised the world (Berger 1967). The context at the time was conducive to such forecasts, shaped by dramatic rates of religious disaffiliation in the decades following the Second World War, particularly from the 1960s onwards (De la Cueva 2015, pp. 367–68). These theories gained significant traction not only within academia but also among institutions and the general public. Religion was pushed to the margins of core discussions regarding citizenship rights. Although fundamental rights (associated with freedom of religion and conscience) were upheld, religious belief was often excluded from broader citizenship debates, largely because citizenship itself—as a normative project—was heavily influenced by secularisation theory. Consequently, religious considerations in the construction of citizenship were generally overlooked (Calhoun 2011). The distinction between citizen and believer mirrored the classical division between the public and private spheres, confining religious belief to the latter (Vaggione 2017, p. 7).

However, it was not long before changes could be observed: although adherence to major religions had declined significantly, by the late 1960s, numerous new (or renewed) movements emerged within the major religious traditions. These included revivalist and intensification movements in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Kepel 1991), as well as the importation of Eastern spiritualities into the West in response to the “spiritual hunger” of the countercultural movement and the baby boom generation, whose youth viewed both traditional religion and consumer capitalism as empty promises (Sieglar 2006, p. 60).

These transformations affected not only the consciousness of believers but also religious institutions, which adapted their strategies to the newly globalised, pluralistic, and relativistic religious landscape (Bastian et al. 2001). The fact that religion prevailed required the reformulation of the secularisation paradigm.

Spain has evolved from a “state-imposed” religious monopoly of Catholicism (Stark and McCann 1993, p. 112), enforced by the Francoist regime in the 20th century and the majority of 19th-century constitutionalism (Contreras-Mazarío 2011, p. 7), to a model that, under the 1978 Constitution, promotes freedom of religion and worship, and therefore, pluralism. As in other European countries, despite constitutional and legal affirmations of religious freedom, the public sphere frequently demonstrates resistance to the full accommodation of minority religious practices, relegating them to the margins through bureaucratic impediments and social anxieties. This process of institutionalisation—often yielding suboptimal outcomes—reveals the complex intersections between the state and religious actors across local, national, and international political spheres (Emmerich 2022, p. 587). As in the German case (Körs 2019, p. 456), in Spain general laws and specific

agreements likewise constitute a decisive step towards legal equality, but bring with them shortcomings that show the limited impact of contract governance measured against the complex reality of (non-)religious life in contemporary societies. Questions such as the visibility of religious minorities in the public sphere (Griera and Burchardt 2016; Salguero and Hejazi 2020; Cornejo and Griera 2022; Albert and Martínez-Cuadros 2021) or their claims and demands (Tarrés and Rosón 2009; Astor and Griera 2016; Salguero and Siguero 2021; Díez de Velasco 2023) are just some of the issues of current interest to scholars. The late 20th-century emergence of multicultural and religiously plural societies in the West, including Spain, is a hallmark of modernity, or “modernities” (Berger 2014).

This change marked the end of a phase when religious diversity was suppressed and managed through state ecclesiastical monopolies or oligopolistic confessional cartels promoting dominant values (Bouma 1999, p. 7). In Spain, the concept of a “religious monopoly” has now disappeared, giving way to a distinction between majority and minority denominations. The latter include all religious groups other than the Catholic Church, which has historically been the majority faith: one that “has predominated throughout the territory as the hegemonic religion and, with few exceptions, the only one, enjoying close ties with political power” (Briones 2001, p. 128).

3. Research Methodology

This article is part of an ongoing project to research public policies and religious freedom and equality, conducted primarily by jurists and, to a lesser extent, by social scientists. This multidisciplinary approach has enabled the inclusion of the anthropology of religion and state ecclesiastical law in the analysis of the public management of religious diversity in various territories across Spain. Anthropology has provided methodological tools and theoretical knowledge that have shed light on the social and cultural dynamics of religious communities, their interaction with institutions and the strategies they deploy in navigating regulatory frameworks. In turn, the use of an ethnographic approach aims to capture the plethora of experiences and narratives of the actors involved, thereby facilitating the design of public policies more in line with the social and territorial reality. However, it must be stressed that these two fields of study have not been employed in isolation: indeed, the anthropological approach has required a broad recourse to law, in order to understand the implications for a religious faith of holding varying degrees of recognition in Spain, the various legal frameworks that affect religious matters, and clarify the individual and collective dimensions of the fundamental right to ideological and religious freedom. Ethnography has proved an incisive lens through which to interrogate the dynamics of religious governance in a post-secular milieu. It likewise furnishes a rigorous framework for examining inter-religious relations and for elucidating the ways in which civil society perceives religious minorities, as recent scholarship attests (Emmerich 2023). Following Ammerman’s (2020, 2021) call to study “lived religion” through a practice-oriented approach, a perspective has been adopted that prioritises everyday repertoires, the situated uses of religious discourse, and the relational logic with institutional frameworks. The adoption of this prism of lived religion deliberately shifts attention away from the declarative plane of beliefs towards the ways in which actors embody, perform, and negotiate the religious in the streets and before administrative authorities. Consequently, it allows for a critical examination of the classic opposition between the secular and the religious by demonstrating how subjects assemble sacred meanings in constant dialogue with secular norms, power structures, and migratory trajectories.

For this study, the sample focuses on the two religious minorities with the largest number of adherents and places of worship, with particular attention to their primary current demands. Although cemeteries and religious education may seem like unrelated

issues, in Spain both are governed by the same piece of legislation—Organic Law 7/1980 of 5 July, on Religious Freedom—specifically in two consecutive articles: the right to a dignified burial in Article 2(b), and the right to religious education in Article 2(c). Moreover, Evangelicals and Muslims enjoy an equal level of public recognition: both denominations are governed by two nearly identical laws, enacted on the same day. These are Law 24/1992 of 10 November, which ratifies the Agreement of Cooperation between the State and the Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities of Spain, and Law 26/1992 of 10 November, which ratifies the Agreement of Cooperation between the State and the Islamic Commission of Spain, respectively. Article 2 of both laws addresses matters related to places of worship, including cemeteries, while Article 10 covers religious education.

The anthropological research was grounded in an applied ethnographic methodology, consisting of a prolonged immersion from September 2024 to May 2025 in both the social contexts of the subjects studied and the legal and institutional environments. This provided a profound insight into their practices, discourses, and cultural representations (Geertz 1973; Hammersley and Atkinson 1990). The fieldwork was conducted in successive, interrelated stages, from initial contact and entry into the field, to the feedback phase involving the participants. In this regard, six in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of six individuals, interviewing three members or representatives from each community. The main objective of these interviews was to identify individual perceptions regarding the regulation of religious diversity, challenges to inclusion, and the strategies communities employ in overcoming institutional barriers. A further ethnographic technique employed was observation—both direct and participant, providing an insight into social agent practices and reconstructing social and cultural processes (Jociles 2018, p. 121). A number of religious and institutional events were observed through participant observation, alongside other related activities organised by various actors. These included public bodies such as the Pluralismo y Convivencia Foundation, religious organisations like the Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities of Spain (FEREDE), and citizen associations such as Asociación Entierro Digno. Furthermore, participant observation was also conducted at diffusion and awareness-raising activities, as well as academic meetings pertinent to the study's theme, to which some of the implicated religious actors were invited. By adopting a descriptive and interpretative approach, this technique allowed us to document interactions, rituals, and discourses in context, taking structured field notes in accordance with the analysis categories that emerged (Emerson et al. 2011).

The review of written sources was divided into three interrelated parts. The first included national and international scientific literature on religious diversity management, with a particular focus on the case of Spain. A second centred on the sociological aspects and history of the religious denominations under study, complemented with a selection of materials that provided an emic perspective. Thirdly, due to the multidisciplinary nature of our study, legal literature was also consulted in relation to several key questions referred to above. Lastly, given the significant role legal considerations play in our research, various legislative texts and other normative instruments from different levels of governance were consulted and analysed. Informal consultations were held with legal experts, including members of the legal teams of the religious communities studied. Other primary sources were used: public resources such as the Register of Religious Entities (RER) and the Directory of Places of Worship maintained by the Spanish Observatory of Religious Pluralism, as well as private sources like the internal records of certain denominations, websites and social media accounts of national and international organisations representing these faiths, and research platforms such as the Pew Research Center.

4. Religious Minorities in the Spanish Public Sphere

The distinction between “majority faiths” and “minority faiths” is based on two interrelated aspects: the degree of legal recognition and the quantitative distribution of legal structures and places of worship. In the case of the former, Spain’s legal framework establishes five levels of religious recognition. At the highest level is the Catholic Church, explicitly recognised in the Spanish Constitution and beneficiary of international agreements signed in 1979 that grant it privileges in legal, educational, economic, and religious assistance affairs (Díez de Velasco 2023, p. 45). On a second level, the focus of this article, are the faiths for which cooperation agreements were signed in 1992, namely Evangelicals, Jews, and Muslims, whose rights are regulated by national laws. The third level includes faiths which are considered in Spain to be firmly established (Notorio Arraigo), yet which do not have similar cooperation agreements: Mormons (2003), Jehovah’s Witnesses (2006), Buddhists (2007), Orthodox Christians (2010), and Bahá’ís (2023). Although they have access to certain benefits, they are not guaranteed the capacity to enter into agreements with the State. The fourth level comprises faiths registered on the Spanish Registry of Religious Entities (RER by its Spanish initials) without Notorio Arraigo, such as native Pagans, Hindus, Scientology, or Sikhs. Finally, the fifth level includes unregistered groups that operate as cultural associations (Díez de Velasco 2023).

Regarding the quantitative distribution, as of February 2025, there were 20,778 religious entities registered on the RER, 70.22% of which belong to the Catholic Church (14,592 entities) and 29.78% to religious minorities (6186 entities). Among the latter, Evangelical Christianity leads with 3543 entities, followed by Islam with 2119. In some regions, minority faiths surpass the Catholic Church in the number of entities. Examples include the Canary Islands (305 compared with 211) and Catalonia (1295 and 1115, respectively). In Ceuta and Melilla, Islam is the majority denomination in institutional terms. Turning to places of worship, the Catholic Church has 22,933 parishes, 2536 educational centres, and 703 monasteries, showing a slight decline since 2021. In contrast, places of worship for minority faiths have risen 7443 in 2020 to 8165 in 2024, with significant growth in Evangelical Christianity (4547 places in 2025) and Islam (1909). The highest concentrations are found in Catalonia (1631), Andalusia (1298), Madrid (1174), and the Valencian Community (939). On a municipal level, Madrid (600), Barcelona (345), and Valencia (176) stand out.

These data reflect that, although the Catholic Church remains the predominant denomination, its institutional presence is declining slightly, accompanied by a decrease in religious practice. According to the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS by its Spanish initials), in January 2025, 56.1% of the population identified as Catholic, but only 19.1% considered themselves practising, in contrast to 90.5% in 1978. Simultaneously, the percentage of agnostics, atheists, and indifferent individuals has risen to 40.9%. Furthermore, the decline of the Catholic Church is also reflected in the reduction in the number of sacraments performed: baptisms have decreased from 241,271 in 2019 to 152,426 in 2025; communions from 229,602 to 162,580; confirmations from 136,503 to 107,153; and marriages from 46,556 to 33,500.

4.1. Evangelical Teaching in State Schools

Historically, Protestantism in Spain has faced periods of persecution and marginalisation, especially under Franco’s regime. However, the 1978 Constitution and the 1980 Law on Religious Freedom (LOLR by its Spanish initials) marked a turning point by guaranteeing freedom of worship, facilitating its expansion. A key actor in its representation is FEREDE by its Spanish initials), founded in 1956 and officially recognised in 1986, driving cooperation with the State and legal, educational, and social initiatives. There are currently 4547 Evangelical temples, making up the largest segment of minority faith communities.

Nevertheless, the Evangelical community still faces inequalities compared to the Catholic Church, as its legal status remains subject to political decisions. Furthermore, a generalised lack of knowledge about Protestantism hinders its integration and full recognition in society.

We experience widespread discrimination, both in a legal sense and the way we are treated. We are still seen as a marginal minority or associated with sects, even though Protestantism has played a fundamental role in the history of Europe and the evolution of democratic values. I've even been asked why, if I'm Spanish, I'm an Evangelist. It's understandable of foreigners, but Spaniards. . . Plurality has to be consolidated as a value.

(Blázquez, former Executive Secretary of FEREDE)

One of the principal challenges facing Evangelical churches in Spain is the implementation of Evangelical Religious Education (ERE) in state education. One of the principal challenges facing Evangelical churches in Spain is the implementation of Evangelical Religious Education (ERE) in state education. Through our fieldwork, we were able to ascertain the significant relevance of this issue for Spanish Evangelical churches, evident in both the interviews conducted and the participant observation sessions. This was particularly highlighted in events such as the open days held by the First Baptist Church of Madrid in 2024 and 2025 for university students, where a representative from FEREDE elucidated this situation to the attendees.

Although Article 10 of the 1992 agreement recognises this right in public and chartered schools, its application remains irregular and faces administrative obstacles. The agreement stipulates that teachers require FEREDE approval, and syllabuses and materials must be validated by the federation and churches. Schools must also provide adequate spaces, and churches can offer courses in state universities and manage educational centres within the legal framework. However, in the 1993–94 school year, ERE was taught outside the syllabus and teachers received no pay. The 1996 agreement regulated the hiring of teachers and their salaries under the supervision of the General Council of Evangelical Religious Education and the Ministry of Education.

In 1996, an agreement was signed with the State and the Ministry of Education enabling ERE teachers to enter schools. . . In 2007, a Royal Decree was issued concerning the hiring of religion teachers generally, but no changes were made to the 1996 agreement, which stipulated that it was the churches that would pay Evangelical religion teachers, a situation that is still in force today. Each year, we ask for changes to be made, but here we are in 2025 and nothing has changed. It's extremely frustrating, because if you look at the 1996 agreement, you'll see it's completely outdated, yet only some terms of that agreement are upheld, and to our detriment. It's only ever referred to in order to remind us that we need a minimum number of pupils per stage. That's all it's used for, rather than facilitating religious education for a minority. In that sense, it's sad, but we have to keep fighting.

(ERE Coordinator)

In Spain, Evangelical Religious Education faces multiple challenges that affect its development, including its uneven application across Spain: a number of autonomous communities have progressed in its implementation, whilst others continue to ignore this right. Examples include the Valencian Community and Navarra, which impose severe restrictions on hiring teachers and requests to teach this subject.

In 2018, the Valencian Community opened five schools to cover the entire region and accommodate all pupils. However, since then, no further teaching staff have been hired, and no new schools have opened. . . In 2021–22, when we realised that these promises

were not being kept, here at the Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities we decided to take legal action against the Regional Ministry of Education for failing to guarantee the rights of the parents that had requested these teachings.

In Andalusia, responsibility for education is held by the Regional Ministry of Education, except in the case of religion, which falls to the autonomous government in the case of secondary education, and the national Ministry in the case of primary education. This means we have to work with two different sets of legislation and regulations: while primary school teachers for other subjects are employed by the autonomous government, teachers of religion are appointed by the Ministry.

(ERE Coordinator)

In certain autonomous communities, the opportunity for pupils to request ERE has been hindered by its omission from enrolment forms. Specifically, in Andalusia, a Framework Collaboration Agreement was signed in 2006 between the Andalusian Evangelical Council (CEAA by its Spanish initials) and the autonomous government, but its implementation was delayed until 2009 due to internal issues within the CEAA. During the 2023–2024 school year, over 3000 pupils in Andalusia were deprived of ERE because the regional government refused to hire additional teachers.

Some autonomous communities refuse outright to hire teachers. Even when families request ERE, bureaucratic obstacles sometimes impede its implementation.

(ERE Coordinator)

This situation contrasts starkly with Catholic religious education, where students' rights are guaranteed: Evangelical pupils face administrative barriers and a general lack of knowledge of their rights. Many families are unaware of their entitlement to ERE, and even when they are, they encounter administrative barriers and insufficient information from schools.

Many families don't know they can request this subject. In some schools, it doesn't even appear as an option when enrolling.

(ERE Coordinator)

According to data published on the website of FEREDÉ's ERE Council (March 2025) for the 2024–25 school year, there are currently 1236 schools providing Evangelical religious education, with 376 ERE teachers for 26,747 pupils.

In those [schools], it's being taught normally, but we're struggling to increase the number. A couple of days ago, we had a meeting with the coordinators from each province, and they told us about the difficulties they're facing in their areas—and they all coincide with those we've mentioned. In some schools, it's simply not offered; in others, it's not included on the enrolment form; no information is given; or they say, "No, we don't have that here". In other cases, they actively discourage people from requesting it. We've even come across situations where, after someone has requested it, the school has called the parents and said: "So, what do you want your child to do: maths or religion? If you want them to take evangelical RE, we'll have to take them out of maths." That's completely illegal.

(Blázquez, former Executive Secretary of FEREDÉ)

That happens because sometimes they group the students together, and instead of everyone leaving during the religion or alternative subject hour, they pull them out at whatever time the year three group has religion. For instance, if Class 3A is in maths, 3B is in social studies, and 3C is scheduled for religion, then students from 3A and 3B get taken out of whatever class they're in to go to religion. So then they say to the parents, "Do you want your child to miss maths or Spanish language?" And when the parents

say, “I don’t want them to miss either”, they’re told, “So, take them out of Evangelical Religious Education”.

(ERE Coordinator)

A further difficulty is the lack of teaching staff and precarious conditions: unlike teachers of Catholicism, their Evangelical counterparts face precarious contracts, low salaries, and difficulties in achieving job stability. Teachers often have to work in several schools just to earn a decent wage, which is an obstacle to continuity and quality education.

Evangelical religion teachers have unstable contracts and therefore lack a sense of job security. Contracts are usually part-time, temporary, and poorly paid, making it hard to attract qualified professionals and to guarantee quality teaching.

(ERE Coordinator)

In order to address institutional inequalities, Evangelical churches in Spain have pushed for reforms that will guarantee full recognition of their rights. They have called for an update to the 1996 agreement in order to achieve fair conditions, greater transparency in the process of requesting Evangelical Religious Education (ERE), and its clear inclusion on enrolment forms. They are also calling for stable employment and fair pay for Evangelical religion teachers. Additionally, they have stepped up negotiations with public authorities to demand compliance with the cooperation agreements. Through these actions, they aim to consolidate their recognition and achieve real equality in a democratic state.

4.2. The Question of Islamic Burials

In Spain, minority faiths which, like Islam and Judaism, have specific requirements regarding the treatment of the deceased and burial practices, can use three types of cemeteries: privately or communally owned sites, such as the Jewish cemetery in Hoyo de Manzanares (Madrid) or the Muslim cemetery of Suhail in Fuengirola (Malaga); the so-called historical cemeteries—particularly in the case of Islam, known as “war cemeteries”—with many examples throughout Spain, from Seville to A Coruña, the site of a former “Moorish” cemetery, now converted into a cultural facility; and those located on municipal plots, also spread across many cities, from Jerez de la Frontera (Cadiz) to Bilbao. Our study is centred on these last two types, given their relevance in terms of the fundamental right to religious freedom and their significant presence in Spain. Particular attention has been given to the case of Madrid over the last two years, through ethnographic research addressing new citizen-actors and the contents of their discourse, practices and strategies. In this sense, the Asociación Entierro Digno (Decent Burial Association) has played a key role: while not seeking to replace the Islamic Commission of Spain (CIE by its Spanish initials), it has succeeded in significantly raising awareness of this issue among various public institutions and social groups, as will be shown below. Indeed, we were able to substantiate this awareness-raising work during our fieldwork, attending numerous related events such as two conferences delivered by Maysoun Douas at public universities in Madrid (2024 and 2025), and her participation in the colloquium following the screening of the documentary *Viure la mort (Living the Death)* at El Teatro del Barrio, Madrid (2024).

Within this context, Islamic burials encompasses all matters related to securing a burial space for deceased Muslims, as well as the prescribed pre-burial rites—washing (ghusl), perfuming (taḥnīṭ), and shrouding (takfīn)—and the burial in accordance with Islamic norms (prayers and burial or dafan, in an individual grave, or qabr dug directly into the ground and oriented toward Mecca). This is a key concern, not only in Spain, but also for Muslim communities across Western Europe (Maussen 2007). It has been one of the recurring demands made by Muslim communities in Spain to public institutions over the last three decades

(Moreras 2004; Tarrés 2006; Salguero 2011, 2023; Tarrés and Moreras 2019; Salguero and Siguero 2021; Salguero and Gil-Benumea 2024; Gil-Benumea and Salguero 2025).

In response to demands for suitable burial spaces, local authorities have generally opted to reserve plots within municipal cemeteries, attempting to balance the individual right to religious freedom with the principles of equality and non-segregation. Several Muslim cemeteries built during the Spanish Civil War have been rehabilitated for contemporary use. Regarding other demands, some autonomous governments, like the Andalusian government in 2001, have begun to amend their respective regulations accordingly. However, these advancements often take place in a context that remains problematic for ensuring a “decent burial”. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the corresponding increase in deaths further highlighted the shortcomings in burial facilities and funeral services available to Muslims in Spain, particularly in major cities like Madrid.

In April 2020, the CIE published its Report on Cemeteries for Muslims, describing Islamic burials as a “sensitive, delicate and emotionally relevant question for Muslims in Spain”. The report went on to state that although “it has been an ongoing issue for nearly thirty years, it is currently being aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic” (Ajana 2020, p. 2). At the time, there were 35 Islamic cemeteries (5 of which were inactive) serving an estimated population of two million people, scattered unevenly around Spain. Five autonomous communities had no designated sites for Muslim burials or private cemeteries for this purpose: Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura, and Galicia. As a result, the deceased and their families had to travel to other communities, and to make matters worse, many cemeteries only accepted persons who had resided in the corresponding province. Moreover, not all of these cemeteries were operational: those in Lucena (Cordoba) and Huelva were undergoing renovation work, while those in Córdoba, Murcia, and Palma de Mallorca were already full (Ajana 2020, p. 3). Five years on, the situation is much the same, and Madrid has now joined the list of autonomous communities lacking these facilities. In light of these deficiencies, private initiatives for Islamic cemeteries have begun to emerge, such as Al Salam in Chiva (Valencia), along with other types of businesses ranging from Islamic funeral homes to death insurance companies offering repatriation services for deceased individuals of foreign origin, such as Morocco (Salguero and Gil-Benumea 2024, p. 285).

In this context, Madrid has been in the media spotlight in recent years. The first documented requests date back to the year 2000, when the Islamic Cultural Centre of Madrid (CCIM by its Spanish initials) unsuccessfully approached the City Council. Subsequent attempts, led by the CCIM and the CIE, have resulted in the current deadlock. Despite approval from the City Council on 20 July 2022, for a proposal submitted by the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE by its Spanish initials), to designate a 10,000 m² plot in the Carabanchel cemetery, no further progress has been made. Moreover, the former cemetery in Griñón remains closed since the local council announced it had reached maximum capacity and was therefore being closed for extension work, including the demolition of the mosque and the creation of 145 new graves (Salguero and Siguero 2021). In short, Madrid lacks a burial space for a population of some 323,700 Muslims. This is Spain’s third largest Muslim community, surpassed only by Andalusia (417,139) and Catalonia (694,046) according to data from the *Observatorio Andalusi* (2025). However, these two autonomous communities have 12 and 6 Islamic cemeteries, respectively. Of the 25 cemeteries in the city of Madrid, none meet the requirements for Islamic burials.

This situation was brought to public attention by Ignacio Murgui, a member of the left-wing Más Madrid political party, during a meeting of the City Council’s Deputy Mayor’s Office, Spokesperson’s Office, Safety and Emergency Services Commission held on 3 December 2024. He warned the commission that “this highly sensitive issue has been

on hold for years, with no advances” from the City Council since the June 2022 plenary session. He also called for the creation of a monitoring committee that would include the various parties, and the drafting of a work plan—proposals that were welcomed by civic groups such as the Asociación Entierro Digno. However, the Deputy Mayor and Delegate for Safety and the Emergency Services, Inmaculada Sanz (a member of the conservative PP political party), responded that the matter “is not the responsibility of this City Council,” citing the fact that “the Muslim community does not have a single representative, but several, each with a different, very different, approach”, an argument that the People’s Party (PP by its Spanish initials) has used on previous occasions (Salguero and Siguero 2021, p. 120).

In terms of the autonomous community’s management of this question, the key lies in amending the mortuary regulations to allow Muslim burials without a coffin, a question that the CIE has addressed with various regional governments to varying degrees of success (Ajana 2020, p. 3). This issue is currently again a matter of debate in Madrid. On 2 December 2024, a non-legislative proposal submitted by the PSOE was approved, with the support of Más Madrid and the People’s Party (PP by its Spanish initials), and the abstention of the far-right party, Vox. Among other measures, it called for a review of the regulation that requires the use of coffins even for Islamic burials. The Asociación Entierro Digno played a key role in this development: in June 2023, the association handed in a petition with some 500 signatures to the Ombuds Office, calling for an investigation into the breach of their rights regarding the situation in Madrid’s cemeteries, as well as the compulsory use of coffins:

We demand that the use of coffins be exempted in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, in line with other Autonomous Communities such as Galicia, Andalusia, Valencia, and the Autonomous Cities of Ceuta and Melilla. This was also one of the recommendations made by the Advisory Commission on Religious Freedom. (...) The Ombudsperson spoke to both the Autonomous Community of Madrid and the Spanish Ministry [of Health]. The Autonomous Community of Madrid responded that they were open to using biodegradable coffins, and the Ombudsperson asked us if we agreed. We said no, and then the Autonomous Community of Madrid announced that it would update its Mortuary Health Regulations to exempt the use of coffins. With the non-legislative proposal presented by the PSOE, an agreement was reached recognising that the Community of Madrid should facilitate the burial of people that profess other faiths, acknowledging their rites and also regarding the exhumation of coffins.

(Member of the Asociación Entierro Digno, 11 March 2025)

5. Conclusions

Ethnography is a fundamental approach for the study of religious freedom that goes beyond the normative and doctrinal analysis of the law. While state ecclesiastical law focuses on the legal framework regulating freedom of conscience and worship, ethnographic practice helps us understand how these regulations are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by religious communities in their specific contexts. This discipline allows the analysis of the myriad ways in which religious freedom is understood and exercised, focusing on factors such as territorial pluralism, power relations, cultural adaptation and institutional recognition.

From a postsecular perspective, the governance of religious diversity cannot be reduced to a static balance of rights; rather, it requires flexible and dialogical intermediary structures that acknowledge the internal plurality of each confession and their repertoires of agency. This entails moving beyond a purely contractual logic focused on cooperation agreements towards a relational logic that activates deliberative spaces, mutual consultation, and

the joint design of policies between the State and religious actors. Regarding the dynamics of religious pluralism in Spain, faiths with lower levels of official recognition tend to place greater demands on public institutions than those in more privileged positions. In some cases, such as Evangelical and Muslim communities, these demands focus on the effective enforcement of rights that have already been granted, yet which are not always adhered to: the legal provision of status does not always guarantee the actual implementation of the fundamental right, leading to repeated demands by many local communities and their representative bodies, as shown in the case of Evangelical Religious Education (ERE) and Islamic burials. The privileged status of the Catholic Church contrasts with data regarding the presence of different faiths in Spain, evidencing that while the Catholic Church remains the predominant faith, its numbers are showing a slight downward trend, accompanied by a drop in religious practice. Meanwhile, minority religions continue to grow, particularly those linked to well-established migrant communities, such as Moroccans, now in their second and third generations—in other words, full-fledged Spanish Muslims.

As for the participation of religious minorities in Spain's public sphere, several specific characteristics arise from an underlying and common inequality, namely, the majority-minority framework, which originates in the persistence of a Catholic-centric cosmic worldview. In the case of Evangelical communities, despite legal recognition, ERE continues to be implemented in an irregular manner due to administrative barriers, a lack of teaching staff and precarious working conditions. The Evangelical community has continuously pushed for reform and greater transparency, but the lack of political will and a Catholic-centric perspective continue to hinder its full recognition within the Spanish educational system: challenges that these findings place before public administration.

In turn, the question of Islamic burials is a major issue for Muslim communities in Spain, due to the lack of appropriate spaces and their uneven distribution across the country, as well as mortuary regulations that fail to include Islamic burial requirements. In the case of Madrid, the lack of progress in this sense and the administrative obstacles encountered highlight the need for greater political will to guarantee this right. In response, new initiatives have emerged outside the traditional channels of religious representation, such as the Asociación Entierro Digno, which has spotlighted the issue and exerted pressure on institutions. However, both these new initiatives and existing religious federations remain heavily dependent on the political will of the authorities, who are ultimately responsible for ensuring governance that attends to diversity.

In short, both cases illustrate how the public management of religious diversity imposes regulatory and administrative barriers that lead to the unequal application of rights. The decentralisation of competences and the lack of training in religious diversity further aggravate these challenges. For a more equitable approach, it is essential to boost institutional cooperation, ensure the effective application of rights, and promote an intercultural approach within public administration.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CCIM	Islamic Cultural Centre of Madrid
CEAA	Andalusian Evangelical Council
CIE	Islamic Commission of Spain
CIS	Centre for Sociological Research
ERE	Evangelical Religious Education
FEREDE	Federation of Evangelical Religious Entities of Spain
LOLR	Organic Law on Religious Freedom
PP	People's Party
PSOE	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party
RER	Register of Religious Entities

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