

Bigotry Wins in Switzerland

Voting to Ban the Construction of Minarets

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[Swissinfo surveys the headlines in Switzerland Monday morning and finds that the press there universally condemned and expressed dismay at Sunday's vote.](#) Editors expressed consternation at the inevitable tarnishing of Switzerland's image and worried about the consequences. Will there be boycotts? Sanctions? Appeals to the European Court of Human Rights? I can anticipate right now arguments to excuse this outbreak of bigotry in the Alps that will be advanced by our own fringe Right, of neoconservatives and those who think, without daring to say it, that "white culture" is superior to all other world civilizations and deserves to dominate or wipe the others out.

The first is that it is only natural that white, Christian Europeans should be afraid of being swamped by people adhering to an alien, non-European religion.

Switzerland is said to be 5 percent Muslim, and of course this proportion is a recent phenomenon there and so unsettling to some. But Islam is not new to Europe. Parts of what is now Spain were Muslim for 700 years, and much of the eastern stretches of what is now the European Union were ruled by Muslims for centuries and had significant Muslim populations. Cordoba and Sarajevo are not in Asia or Latin America. They are in Europe. And they are cities formed in the bosom of Muslim civilization.

The European city of Cordoba in the medieval period [has been described thusly](#):

For centuries, Cordoba used to be the jewel of Europe, which dazzled visitors from the North. Visitors marveled at what seemed to them an extraordinary general prosperity; one could travel for ten miles by the light of street lamps, and along an uninterrupted series of buildings. The city is said to have had then 200,000 houses, 600 mosques, and 900 public baths. Over the quiet Guadalquivir Arab engineers threw a great stone bridge of seventeen arches, each fifty spans in width. One of the earliest undertakings of Abd al-Rahman I was an aqueduct that brought to Cordova an abundance of fresh water for homes, gardens, fountains, and baths.

So if the Swiss think that Islam is alien to Europe, then they are thinking of a rather small Europe, not the Europe that now actually exists. Minarets dotted Cordoba. The Arnaudia mosque in Banja Luca dates back to the 1400s; it was [destroyed along with dozens of others by fanatics in the civil war that accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia](#) in the 1990s.

As for the likely comeback, that Muslims came to Europe from the 700s of the Common Era as conquerors, unlike Christianity, actually both were conquering state religions. It was the

conversion of an emperor that gave a favored position to Christianity in Europe, which was a small minority on the continent at the time. And Charlemagne forcibly imposed Christianity on the German tribes up to the Elbe. In the cases both of European Christianity and European Islam, there were many willing converts among the ordinary folk, who thrilled to itinerant preachers or beautiful chanting.

Others will allege that Muslims do not grant freedom of religion to Christians in their midst. First of all, this allegation is not true if we look at the full range of the countries where the 1.5 billion Muslims live. Among the nearly 60 Muslim-majority states in the world, only one, Saudi Arabia, forbids the building of churches. Does Switzerland really want to be like Saudi Arabia?

Here is a Western Christian description of the situation of Christians in Syria:

In Syria, as in all other Arab countries of the Middle East except Saudi Arabia, freedom of religion is guaranteed in law . . . We should like to point out too that in Syria and in several other countries of the region, Christian churches benefit from free water and electricity supplies, are exempt from several types of tax and can seek building permission for new churches (in Syria, land for these buildings are granted by the State) or repair existing ones.

It should be noted too that there are Christian members of Parliament and of government in Syria and other countries, sometimes in a fixed number (as in Lebanon and Jordan.)

Finally, we note that a new personal statute was promulgated on 18 June 2006 for the various Christian Churches found in Syria, which purposely and verbatim repeats most of the rules of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches promulgated by Pope John Paul II.

That is, in Muslim-majority Syria, the government actually grants land to Christians for the building of churches, along with free water and electricity. Christians have their own personal status legal code, straight from the Vatican. (It is because Christians have their own law in the Middle East, backed by the state, that Muslims in the West are puzzled as to why they cannot practice their personal status code.) Christians have freedom of religion, though there are sensitivities about attempts to convert others (as there are everywhere in the Middle East, including Israel). And Christians are represented in the legislature. With Switzerland's 5 percent Muslim population, how many Muslim members of parliament does it have?

It will also be alleged that in Egypt some clergymen gave fatwas or legal opinions that building churches is a sin, and it will be argued that Christians have been attacked by Muslims in Upper Egypt.

These arguments are fallacies. You cannot compare the behavior of some Muslim fanatics in rural Egypt to the laws and ideals of the Swiss Republic. We have to look at Egyptian law and policy.

The Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar Seminary, the foremost center of Sunni Muslim learning, ["added in statements carried by Egyptian newspaper Youm al-Saba'a that Muslims can make voluntary](#) contributions to build churches, pointing out that the church is a house for 'worshipping and tolerance.'" He condemned the fundamentalist Muslims for saying church-

building is sinful. And Egypt has lots of churches, including new Presbyterian ones, following John Calvin, who I believe lived in ... Geneva. About six percent of the population is Christian.

The other problem with excusing Switzerland with reference to Muslims' own imperfect adherence to human rights ideals is that two wrongs don't make a right. The bigoted Right doesn't even have the moral insight of kindergartners if that is the sort of argument they advance. The International Declaration of Human Rights was crafted with the participation of Pakistan, a Muslim country; the global contemporary rights regime is imperfectly adhered to by all countries — it is a claim on the world's behavior, something we must all strive for. If the Swiss stepped back from it, they stepped back in absolute terms. It doesn't help us get to global human rights to say that is o.k. because others are also failing to live up to the Declaration.

The other Wahhabi state besides Saudi Arabia, Qatar, has allowed the building of Christian churches. But they are not allowed to have steeples or bells. This policy is a mirror image to that of the Swiss. So Switzerland, after centuries of striving for civilization and enlightenment, has just about reached the same level of tolerance as that exhibited by a small Gulf Wahhabi country, the people of which were mostly Bedouins only a hundred years ago.

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