

Thinking Twice about the Minaret Ban in Switzerland

By Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D.

In the last few days we have begun to hear the various international protests against the actions of Swiss voters, to not allow the construction of future minarets in their small alpine nation. Very few thoughtful readers should be surprised that *Aljazeera* is complaining about “intolerance,” “extreme Islamophobia,” and “religious hatred.” In this context, *Aljazeera* seems to agree with Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the secretary general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, who called the ban an “example of growing anti-Islamic incitement in Europe by the extremist, anti-immigrant, xenophobic, racist, scare-mongering ultra-right politicians who reign over common sense, wisdom and universal values.”¹ Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey has been quoted as saying that religious minorities in Turkey (who are often Christians) enjoy greater liberties than religious minorities in Switzerland (who are often Muslims).² And the claims that the Swiss referendum violates the European Convention on Human Rights as well as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights have not been surprising. Are we entering a new phase in the so-called “Clash of Civilizations?”

To think twice about this debate and reduce the clash of civilizations we must notice that **all** the critics of the Swiss voters appeal in a significant manner to universal values or global standards of human behavior. Whether this appeal is to a written code (in the form of a human rights declaration) or is made by comparing the actions of Turkey and Switzerland or is to a less precise notion of universal values, all the parties in the debate want to criticize our Swiss neighbors on the basis of global human values or a universal moral law that should rule over our political decisions. It seems that our Muslim neighbors and our secularist neighbors agree with each other that there is a universal standard of human behavior that is independent of our religious and political loyalties, and that we can expect all reasonable people to know this universal standard. This is important. It is a crucial step away from the clash of civilizations.

In the Christian tradition we have often called these universal values or global standards of human behavior “the natural moral law.” Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, have usually claimed that all sensible people (those who are not psychopaths) know a significant amount about right and wrong, and that this knowledge is a gift of God to all people, regardless of their religion or philosophy of life. This moral knowledge is an important part of what makes a humane civilization possible and this moral knowledge coming from the natural moral law should be central to public, political life together. As Christians, we think that our more distinctly religious morality (which comes from the Bible) is consistent with the more general moral values of the natural moral law, if they are both properly interpreted, but that the moral values and principles for public, political life are not narrowly religious. In a debate like the one raised by our Swiss and our Muslim neighbors, we Christians should assume that all normal people know a lot about basic moral values and principles such as justice, fairness, and honesty.

In any serious debate, one of our first questions is always whether or not the other party really believes what they claim to believe. “Do they really believe their own words?” The only solution is to ask people, whose religious, philosophical, or political loyalties may be very different from our own, to act like they honestly believe their own words. The Muslim organizations and states have asked the Swiss voters and the Swiss government to act like they believe their own words, words which are contained in the Swiss constitution and the global human rights declarations. Now the international community must also ask the Muslim organizations and states to act like they believe their own words. This means allowing real and substantial freedom of religion for minorities in the countries that are officially or substantially Muslim.

I am glad our Muslims neighbors are complaining about that they are not allowed to build Minarets in Switzerland. Apparently they believe in the moral principle of freedom of religion. I believe that allowing other people to formulate their own deepest convictions and then to express those religious/philosophical convictions within a religious community or institution is a fundamental principle of justice, properly recognized as a basic human right. On the basis of the moral/legal principles now recognized and articulated by our Muslim friends, we can now ask them to allow real and substantial freedom of religion for religious minorities in places like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Malaysia, Turkey, Jordan, and Morocco. At the very least, freedom of religion requires allowing people to choose or change their religion, according to their own principles, without legal punishment. And groups of Christians should be allowed, according to the recently articulated Muslim principles, to build church buildings with real steeples in Muslim countries, if Muslims in Switzerland should be allowed to build minarets.

Because this is truly a serious debate, one of my first questions is whether or not the other parties in the debate really believe their own words. After the recent execution of Ehsan Fattahian in Iran, simply because he converted from Islam to Christianity, we need to ask our Muslim neighbors if they really believe their own words about demanding freedom of religion. Our Muslim neighbors should have been more outraged because of this execution than because they cannot build minarets in Switzerland right now. I profoundly hope that real freedom of religion for all people in all countries can be both affirmed and practiced. This is a step toward justice and a step back from a clash of civilizations.

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¹ <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/europe/2009/12/200912142216681985.html>

² <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,664761,00.html>