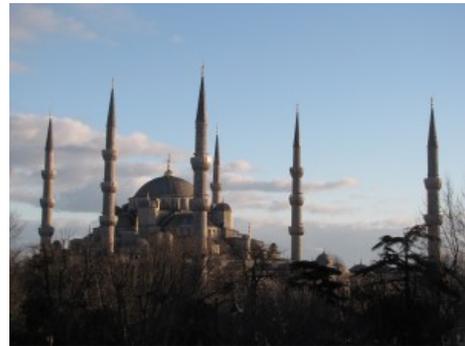


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On Faith: Out of Sight, Out of Mind? — The Swiss Ban Minarets

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Voting by an unexpectedly large margin, the Swiss overwhelmingly adopted a national ban on the construction of minarets. Sunday's vote represents a clear victory for the Swiss right and serves notice that the citizens of Switzerland are concerned about the growing influence of Islam in their country.



The fact that the referendum passed was news in itself. Nevertheless, the most significant aspect of the vote was the margin of victory. As *The Wall Street Journal* reported, “The Swiss voted strongly for the ban, with 58% of votes in favor of the initiative and 42% against. Until about a month ago, polls had predicted voters would solidly reject the ban, though support for the ban had been edging up in recent weeks.” In the end, the measure was approved by voters in 22 of Switzerland's 26 cantons — an overwhelming victory for a very controversial proposal.

According to press reports, Switzerland now has 150 mosques serving about 400,000 Muslims in a population of 7.5 million Swiss. Only four of the mosques have minarets, but none are used for the Muslim call to prayer. This is due to the fact that Switzerland operates under strict noise-pollution rules that prohibit the practice.

The conservative Swiss People's Party (SVP) has long warned of a creeping “Islamisation” of Switzerland, pointing to new mosques, Muslim immigration patterns, and high Muslim birthrates. The party convinced a sufficient number of the Swiss that minarets represent a sign of Islamic extremism and the threat of sharia law.

From a distance, the measure appears to be more symbolic than substantial. In effect, the Swiss voted to ban the most visible evidence of Muslims in their midst, while doing nothing to restrict Muslim immigration or worship. Thus, the voters sent a signal of their anxiety even as they acted in defiance of their country's historic commitment to religious liberty. Oddly, the measure appears to be little more than a highly controversial effort to put the question of Muslim influence out of sight and out of mind.

Understandably, government authorities in Switzerland downplayed the vote and its meaning. Equally understandable were efforts by Muslims to explain why they were offended that minarets were singled out for exclusion in this ban. Can anyone be surprised?

Europe faces a looming crisis of Muslim influence and the spread of Islamic culture throughout the continent. This crisis is one of the most significant questions now facing Europe, and it comes as European cultures seem increasingly uncertain of their own identity and cultural commitments. The crisis is exacerbated by falling birthrates in many European nations. As a matter of fact, the birthrate in most European countries has now fallen beneath the basic replacement level. The severe reduction in the number of babies is a clear sign of a worldview crisis in those countries.

These trends must be matched to unexpectedly high levels of Muslim immigration and the high birth rates, and to

Muslim populations. Put simply, the handwriting is on the wall as European citizens look to future population patterns. Though political correctness limits open discussion, citizens clearly fear the growing influence of the Muslim populations in their countries.

Nevertheless, the banning of minarets appears to be a cowardly move that contradicts Swiss commitments to religious freedom and tolerance. Singling out minarets in this ban is tantamount to isolating Islam and relegating it to second-class status — all protests to the contrary notwithstanding. The Muslim minaret is the central architectural symbol of Islam, as recognizably Muslim as steeples with crosses are recognizably Christian. Any nation that is truly committed to religious liberty cannot sustain a ban on one religiously significant architectural symbol or structure in this manner.

The receding influence of Christianity in Switzerland can be traced directly to theological liberalism in its churches and the increasing secularity of Swiss culture. Islam now enters the void created by the decline of Christianity and Christian culture in Switzerland, and throughout much of the continent as well.

Banning the minaret may serve to hide Muslim influence from view, but it does not address the underlying issues at stake. Surely the Swiss can do better than this. With this measure they have managed to violate religious liberty, anger Muslims, and avoid dealing with reality — all in one simultaneous act. “Out of sight, out of mind” is not a respectable or sustainable policy.

I am always glad to hear from readers and listeners. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

This column is in answer to this question, posed by the editors of The Washington Post and Newsweek magazine for the “On Faith” feature: **“What’s your reaction to Sunday’s decision by voters in Switzerland to ban construction of minarets, the slender towers from which Muslims are called to daily prayers?”**

My essay will be published at the “[On Faith](#)” site shortly.

The famous “Blue Mosque” in Istanbul (known as the Sultan Ahmet Camii) features some of the most impressive minarets in the Muslim world. I took this photo in January 2009.

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