

## **Mosques, minarets, religious diversity: Europe and the rest**

*by*  
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Is the Swiss vote banning the construction of minarets a rupture in a European tradition that is otherwise tolerant of religious diversity?

On the contrary, the Swiss ban on minarets is in conformity with a Continental European hostility towards mosques and minarets. Most European states, even those that were once ruled by Muslims, removed traces of Islamic architecture, some of them not even leaving a single mosque standing.

Swiss voters embarrassed their government, shocked the world and surprised their pollsters by approving a ban on the construction of minarets, the most symbolic element of Islamic architecture, in Switzerland. The purported goal of this ban, which has the status of a constitutional ban, is to prevent the "Islamization" of Switzerland. There are four mosques with minarets in all of Switzerland, and none of them perform the daily calls to the prayer from their minarets. Making matters worse, a large segment of Swiss Muslims are Bosnians, people who escaped ethnic cleansing and concentration camps committed by ultranationalists who targeted historic Ottoman-era mosques of Bosnia as part of their campaign to eradicate Bosnia's Muslim heritage, human and architectural. Now minarets are banned in the peaceful, multicultural and wealthy haven in the Alps where they sought refuge.

Comparison is the basis of the social sciences, and it is the foundation of a fair and dispassionate discussion, especially if the topic of discussion is as heated as religion and politics. And a fair comparison is the basis of a fair discussion, whether on current policy or historical practice. An evenhanded tourist traveling through Spain, France, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Senegal, India, Indonesia, China and Russia would observe this much about religious diversity: While in those Catholic and Protestant countries, once upon a time designated as the (Western) "Christendom," stretching from Portugal and France to Lithuania and Hungary, overlapping more or less with the borders of present-day EU, our hypothetical tourist is not going to find a historic "Muslim quarter" or even a historic mosque, even in those lands that have been ruled by Muslims for centuries. Our tourist will find some Muslim ghettos built to accommodate, mostly, the descendants of Muslim workers called upon to rebuild Europe after World War II. In contrast, in predominately Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and some Eastern Orthodox Christian countries, our hypothetical tourist will find churches, mosques, temples of other religions as well as sizable adherents of many religions coexisting for centuries, if not millennia. This is the big picture. Again, to be fair in our comparison, there are some exceptions to this generalization on the Muslim side, such as Turkey and Algeria, which resemble average European countries in their religious homogeneity. And through the wars and violence in places like Iraq and Pakistan, religious diversity in those Muslim countries is being eroded. But despite exceptions, until the 1960s the religious market in Madrid and Palermo, Budapest and Athens has been "monopolized" by one religion only, Christianity, and our tourist will look in vain if s/he is seeking historical communities of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists or other non-Christian denominations. This picture is in stark contrast to the dazzling religious diversity of Egypt, Syria, India, Indonesia, China, Azerbaijan or even Russia. Given the historical background of a Western Christian monopoly in the religious market, it is somewhat understandable that when Muslims, the first significant group of non-Christians, appeared in post-Holocaust Europe, they have increasingly faced nativist and Islamophobic reactions from the older residents.

### **Historical intolerance**

Western European and Balkan countries have been historically intolerant of mosques, minarets and other symbolic forms of Islamic culture. While living in Central Europe, I was shocked not to find a single historic mosque in Budapest, Hungary, which was ruled

by the Ottomans for more than 150 years. Athens, which lived under Muslim rule for 375 years, until the 19th century, did not have a mosque until 2006, although it is home to an estimated 200,000 Muslims. The same is still true of more than one capital city among EU member states. Although Switzerland will be the first country to have a constitutional amendment against the building of minarets, many other European countries "combat" the "minaret threat" by denying permission for the building of mosques, let alone minarets. Unlike Switzerland, which at least has mosques and four of them with minarets, Slovenia still does not have a single mosque, despite the demands by its Muslim minority (2.4 percent of the population) since 1969.

Germany is the EU member state with the largest population, boasting a Muslim minority estimated at 3 to 4 million people and 2,400 prayer spaces described as "mosques," but its capital city, Berlin, only has a single mosque with a clearly visible minaret, located on the outskirts of the city next to an airport. Even this signature mosque with a minaret was built with the support of the Turkish government next to the historic Muslim cemetery, where Ottoman soldiers who fought on the side of Germany in World War I are buried. While the shining golden cupola of the New Synagogue in central Berlin adorns the Berlin skyline with its sole dome, an Islamic dome and minaret are conspicuous for their absence, despite the presence of a much larger Muslim minority. Right-wing mobilization against the building of a mosque with a minaret in Cologne fortunately failed to prevent the approval of a construction permit for the mosque there. The German Constitution bans popular plebiscites and referenda, a legacy of de-Nazification, since Hitler abused plebiscites and referenda in pursuit of his anti-Semitic, totalitarian and expansionist agenda. Subjecting minority rights and religious freedoms to a popular referendum, though it has the veneer of democracy, is deeply illiberal and against the spirit of representative democracy.

In contrast, Europe's eastern and southern neighbors, Russia and the Muslim countries of the Near East, provide many examples of churches and mosques standing side by side. Most certainly not more democratic or liberal than Western Europe, Russia and the Muslim countries of the Middle East are more accustomed to and accepting of religious diversity and its architectural representations. A bewildering variety of Christian denominations and their churches adorn the Syrian landscape, and I was pleasantly surprised to find churches along with synagogues and mosques in Moscow and elsewhere in present-day Russia, despite the pervasive anti-Semitism and Islamophobia found in that country. Even in Turkey, where, as a result of nationalism, discriminatory policies and multiple wars in the first half of the 20th century, only a very small Christian minority remains today, one can nonetheless find hundreds of churches relatively intact. A comparison with the vanished mosques and minarets of Hungary, Greece, Spain, Sicily, Romania, Serbia and elsewhere in Europe is inescapable. Even I had known little about the centuries-long Islamic civilization in Sicily until becoming interested on this island after reading Tariq Ali's beautiful novel, "A Sultan in Palermo." So thoroughly "erased" from public memory is the Islamic history of Europe, reminiscent of Omar Bartov's description of the vanishing traces of Jewish heritage in Galicia, in his book "Erased."

### **Swiss ban not exceptional**

The Swiss minaret ban has to be considered in the context of a historic resistance to non-Christian religions and their symbols in Europe. The Swiss are not exceptional; many European countries use legal and bureaucratic methods less sensational than referenda and constitutional bans to prevent the building of mosques and minarets. On a positive note, the constitutional ban against the minarets by the Swiss provokes us to interrogate Europe's historical record vis-à-vis non-Christian religions and in comparison to the rest of the world for a truly democratic Europe has to genuinely accommodate the religious diversity in its midst. It has to be multicultural, not only in its demographic stock but also in its official and public expression. Religious pluralism broadly defined, including facing with and embracing Europe's suppressed Islamic history and Muslim heritage, along with accommodation of present-day non-Christian minorities, be they Muslims, Jews or

others, is a sine qua non of such a democratic multiculturalism, one which we must strive for in Europe and elsewhere around the world.

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