

Minarets and Democracy

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The Swiss voted to ban minarets. Photo : Agence France-Presse

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It started again! The eternal debate between religion and democracy is on again. It was sparked by a Swiss referendum held on November 29 2009 that bans construction of minareats in Switzerland. The people have spoken, and the decision of the majority (over 57%) must be respected. That's the first principle of democracy, the sovereignty of the people. This principle is promoted by Western media, and is called upon even in countries beyond the West.

But what is to be done when the public does not vote according to the wishes of the minority that claims to have exclusive access to truth ? Well, then it becomes necessary to oblige the public to 'correct' its will. To quote a high functionary from distant past, people are but cattle without tails ; they can be misled by any clever demagogue, so their will has to be kept in line, or else they will end in dire circumstances. And let us not forget that even Hitler rose to power by the decision of the voting public. Doesn't that prove that they can easily be seduced by dangerous demagogues? But that was not their last 'sin'. On June 12, 2008 the people of Ireland dared to say 'no' to the Eruopean Charter. So they were brought to see reason in a very effective manner. Brussells informed them that their referendum will be repeated as many times as it takes for them to reach the 'correct' vote. This message was clearly understood, and under the additional pressure of the economic crisis,

the Irish referendum was repeated on October 2 2009, and the result was 'yes'. So the European Union was saved. And along with it, neoliberalism. Democracy prevailed. Well, not democracy of the people, but democracy appropriated by professional politicians, who claim to see more clearly from the heights of their ivory towers than those at the bottom of the social ladder. After all, isn't it said that all power comes from God ? Exactly. Which is precisely why construction of religious establishments is encouraged. The more, the better.

But bell towers and minarets together? Well, why not ? We should not abandon multiculturalism just to keep the landscape intact. In fact, landscapes invariably change over time. Bell towers and minarets replaced antique temples, and then started competing with each other. In some places they took turns, following the dictates of the politics of the day. In other places they managed to coexist, as for example in the Balkans. And the landscape didn't even suffer for it ; rather, it was embellished by this architectural blend. Clearly, they can coexist just fine side-by-side, as long as the government (secular or religious) does not spur intolerance.

But the ruling class follows another logic. Religion is a perfect tool for spiritual manipulation of the public. It can pacify and help the sheep to accept their destiny without complaint, but it can also turn the sheep into wolves. Monotheistic religions have become true masters of spiritual manipulation and continue to prove their skill. They all start from the same point : there is only one true God. But they diverge on the ways of worshipping this one God. That creates competition among religions, since they have to gain not just the love of God, but also the souls of the devout, who conveniently give them material contributions - the contributions that sustain religious institutions and their hierarchy. And the devout identify one another through ritual. So attempts of one religion to gather souls by promoting its cult in the hunting grounds of another religion inevitably provokes a reaction that is anything but peaceful.

In fact, the clash of cultures and their dominant religions is now in full swing. Wouldn't it only get worse if construction of minarets is allowed in the very heart of Europe? The good people of Switzerland, who have not gone to war for almost two centuries, are alarmed. Minarets and bell towers side by side, that can have less than friendly consequences. Religious fundamentalists, albeit in the minority, have stepped up to the front of the stage, and with them the discrimination, not just religious but also sexual. Their draconic medieval punishments, used even against children without hesitation, threaten a spiritual dehumanization of the world. How can we be sure that the minority of militant religious fundamentalists will not be followed by the rest of the devout? The popular instinct dictates: better not to let the wolf into the stable. So, no minarets.

The people have spoken, and their will should be respected. This is what all democratic constitutions say. But the times have changed. It's no longer up to the public vote to decide matters ; now local and foreign powers rise above the will of the people and have the final say. They claim that the principle of religious tolerance, as an international law, overrides the will of the public. To refute this reasoning is asking for trouble, because we no longer live in isolated alpine villages, but in a global village where everything is being traded: ideas, goods and even people. So never mind that in some Middle-Eastern countries there may still be no religious tolerance, that human rights may be abused, or that foreigners are held as hostages (even if they are Swiss). We should still be forgiving. Because who knows what will happen if minaret construction does get banned in the name of Swiss dedication to democracy ? The petrodollars may end up in places other than the

Swiss banks. Or, worse, those already here may be taken away, or the oil supplies to Switzerland may get cut. The Libian chief Mouammar el Kadhafi is already working on that. One does not punish a child of the king of kings, of the sheiks and traditional african sultans, merely because some abused servants dare to make a complaint. So if public vote starts questioning the use of religious symbols, that may encourage bans across the globe on the expansion of christian religious denominations that have US headquarters, and are considered a religious sect in other countries. Indeed, some of these denominations preach the value of personal enrichment as pleasing to God. One must believe - in progress, particularly in Africa, where only two things are progressing: the pillage of raw materials, and poverty.

Surely the world, or rather the international community, must not allow to be ridiculed by this referendum orchestrated by the Swiss extreme right-wing party. That would mean legalizing xenophobia and countering the principles of globalization. So, wouldn't it be better to permit the construction of minarets? After all, if ever a religious strife escalates to the point that it threatens to destabilize the country, there will always be troops (the peace-keeping troops, of course) ready to intervene - as a preventive measure, of course.

But wouldn't it be better to prevent such « preventive » intervention ? Through open dialogue, for example? This good old idea is always discussed at all sorts of round tables. Because it is easy to come to an agreement at a conference table. But there it remains. Beyond the conference room, it's another story. Which means that the issue has to be debated all over again. This is done with dogged persistence, but the results remain the same. The issue is debated in conferences, campaigns, seminars, workshops, papers, books, studies, journals, lectures (very nicely presented), even sermons ; but where in all this is actual communication ?

Clearly, it was short-circuited. It is impossible to have a dialogue among different religions when they are reduced to dogmatic adherence to rituals and traditions. And while rituals are a tool for manipulating the populace by the high pontiffs of these religions (and they know very well how to modify them to suit contemporary circumstances and politics of the day) for the rest of the people religious rituals will always remain a source of collective identification, a symbol of an idyllic past when the world seemed to be in order. But all religions, including polytheistic ones, are in essence a compilation of metaphoric messages, stories that need to be decoded in order to understand their true spiritual meaning. If an effort was made to approach religion in this way all over the world, the external manifestations of religions would fall into their place - that of traditions that unite people without force, that enlighten without a threat of punishment, and that permit communication with outsiders and free exchange of ideas. This would then enable religions to evolve spiritually and rise above the trappings of cult symbols and rituals. At this stage, the issue of bell towers and minarets would be a very different matter - complementing instead of competing, instilling mutual trust instead of fear. Had this approach already been taken, the Swiss referendum on minarets would have had a very different result. But since that did not happen, rather than despair, we should set to work to liberate religious teachings from institutionalized dogmas and sanctions, to open the minds and spirit of the devout in all cultures and religions. Because without an open mind there is no dialogue, no communication, no mutual understanding, no awareness of the common plight in the struggle against a common enemy that is destabilizing society, and no true democracy in which public vote benefits the public.

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