“Shaking Hands is an Important Part of Our Culture”

by Hugh Fitzgerald

In the last few years, one country in Europe – Switzerland – has offered lessons in how to deal with Muslims that other Western countries might do well to emulate. For the Swiss have taken a tough line on those Muslims living in their country who have been unwilling to adapt to Swiss ways. Swiss authorities have been requiring Muslims to comply not just with Swiss laws, but with Swiss customs, and imposing stiff fines and other penalties for the failure to observe the country’s social norms.

And that’s not all: they’ve banned the minaret, and may soon ban the burka. All this has been accomplished, since 2009, without apparent concern for what might be the potential economic costs. After all, rich Arabs, especially from Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., have many tens of billions deposited in Swiss banks; Swiss manufacturers count the Gulf Arabs as a major market, and so do the Swiss makers of luxury goods (those celebrated watches). Arab-owned real estate overlooking Lake Geneva and in the Bernese Oberland helps keep property values up. But the Swiss have determinedly ignored all that.

The first significant example of the Swiss pushback to the aggressive Muslim presence came in November 2009. From the New York Times:

> *In a vote that displayed a widespread anxiety about Islam and undermined the country’s reputation for religious tolerance, the Swiss on Sunday overwhelmingly imposed a national ban on the construction of minarets, the prayer towers of mosques, in a referendum drawn up by the far right and opposed by the*

> *government.*
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> *The referendum, which passed with a clear majority of 57.5 percent of the voters and in 22 of Switzerland's 26 cantons, was a victory for the right. The vote against was 42.5 percent. Because the ban gained a majority of votes and passed in a majority of the cantons, it will be added to the Constitution.*

When that vote was held, there were only four mosques – out of 150 – with minarets in all of Switzerland, and those minarets were merely of symbolic significance, not even used for the call to prayer. Yet so great was Swiss unease with Islam by that time that many felt it important to ban the building of any more minarets; the measure passed overwhelmingly. And apparently those Swiss voters were not convinced that the banning of minarets constituted an infringement of the guarantee of freedom of religion enshrined in the Swiss Constitution. But that minaret ban was only the opening salvo.

This year, Switzerland was shaken by several cases where Muslim students refused to comply with Swiss traditions. One involved two immigrant boys, aged 14 and 16, the sons of an imam from Syria, who refused to shake their female teacher's hand. Now in Switzerland, "shaking a teacher's hand before and after class is part of Switzerland's social fabric, and is considered an important sign of politeness and respect." At first, the boys' school decided to grant the boys an exemption, arguing that Islam did not permit physical contact with people of the opposite sex, other than members of the immediate family. And in order to take gender out of the dispute, the school also decided that the boys would not have to shake male teachers' hands, either.

There followed a gigantic uproar all over Switzerland, among teachers, school administrators, politicians. And the uproar was not just on the so-called "right" but, as even the *New*

York Times had to admit, "across the ideological spectrum: Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga, a social democrat, argued that shaking hands with a teacher was an important part of Swiss culture."

> *Bert Zemp, the president of the Swiss teachers' union, also spoke out against the [local school's] decision, saying that the rules should apply to all students and that it sent the wrong message, since the boys would need to shake hands with colleagues, both male and female, as their lives progressed.*

After this backlash, the boys' school decided to refer the matter to the regional – i.e., cantonal, higher – authorities in Basel, who decreed that "the integration of foreigners and the fostering of gender equality were in the public interest and that this consideration trumped the private interests of the two students. **It acknowledged that forcing the students to shake their female teacher's hand was an 'intrusion' on their religious beliefs but said that it was a proportionate one since, in its view, 'it did not involve the central tenets of Islam.'"**

And so the Canton of Basel decided that "parents whose children refused to obey the longstanding tradition could henceforth be fined up to 5,000 Swiss francs" ($5,050). With a fine that size, one that could be imposed for each separate infraction, Muslim students have been effectively forced to shake hands with their teachers, whatever their sex, and whatever the religious claims made by the students or their parents. Thus was a Swiss "tradition" elevated to the status of law. And the issue has been settled, with the Swiss authorities holding their ground, and then some.

Another example of increasing Swiss intransigence is the current campaign for a national referendum on banning the burka, which will likely be held next year. The burka has already been banned in one Swiss canton, the Ticino, and this

month finally went into effect, and the first fine levied, of 10,000 Swiss francs on a burka-wearing female convert who had decided to deliberately ignore the ban.

Walter Wobman of the Swiss People's Party, a member of Parliament, is leading the effort to collect signatures for the referendum, and he is "confident that the idea is a popular one….Wobman has made it clear that his motive in raising the matter is the promotion of equality and western values, writing: 'No one should be able to compel another person to conceal their face because of their gender.'" Instead of shunning Wobman as being "far-right," Swiss feminists have joined his cause, "including the Swiss women's rights activist Julia Onken…[who] called the burka a 'material prison' which 'makes life no longer worth living.'" As of this writing, it looks as though Wobman will obtain the 100,000 signatures needed in order to hold the referendum, and that the burka ban will be applied throughout Switzerland.

Also in the list of actions taken to ensure that Swiss ways prevail on Muslims in Switzerland, rather than the other way around, is the case of the two Muslim immigrant girls who "refused to swim with boys in a coed class at school…They said that their religion prevents them from participating in compulsory swimming lessons with males in the pool at the same time. **Their naturalization application was rejected because the sisters did not comply with the school curriculum**." And that was the end of the matter. No threats, no protests, no riots.

The Swiss want to make sure that Muslim immigrants, whether citizens or not, make a real effort to integrate into Swiss society. They have shown themselves, with the minaret ban, willing, if necessary, to modify their constitution. They have been willing as well to impose enormous fines on the parents of children who fail to comply with school rules, as in the case of the schoolboys who would not shake their teacher's hand. They have even denied citizenship to those who refuse to

accept Swiss ways, as they did with those two Muslim schoolgirls who would not swim with boys in a coed class at school. And now they are considering, and are likely to adopt, a burka ban. The Swiss, you see – strange as it may seem, in the current climate of accommodation – are determined to keep Switzerland Swiss.

That, to me, sounds like a plan.

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