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Europe's Identity Crisis

By PINCHAS GOLDSCHMIDT

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BRUSSELS — It is perhaps ironic that a country that has prided itself on centuries of neutrality should suddenly seek a religious conflict while the home of liberty should seek to tell people how to dress.

Nonetheless, the decision taken by the good burghers of the Germanophone cantons in Switzerland to vote in large majorities in support of a referendum calling for a ban on minarets when there are virtually none in their own eye-range disguises an alarming identity crisis in Europe.

True, Switzerland has long made its own rules. Some cantons delayed women's suffrage until the latter part of the 20th century while an earlier, pre-First World War manifestation of Swiss intolerance saw the country ban its Jews from slaughtering their own meat — a ban that remains in place today.

Similarly, for a French parliamentary committee to call for a ban on the burqa, notwithstanding more pressing local issues such as the state of the economy or the war in the courts between the president and the former prime minister, does seem, on the face of things, rather perverse. All the more so when the burqa is virtually nonexistent in France and even the niqab is such a rare feature on the streets and boulevards of the Fifth Republic.

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Both proposed measures choose to attack what we might term “soft” targets — at least for the extremists — while hiding behind the perceived legitimacy of attacking extremism itself. What they actually do not do is to address the issues of either building permits for minarets or the rights of women, but rather they attack the very visibility of the Muslim presence in Europe itself.

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Sixty-five years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Europeans can permit themselves to be squeamish about how things start and how things, if left unabated, can end, and about how perceived fears of losing national identity need to be addressed very quickly if they are not to lead down a very dangerous path.

Firstly, is there something we can genuinely call a normative European identity, or has Europe's Judeo-Christian heritage been swept away in the nihilism of a mixture of radical secularism and misdirected multiculturalism? As the rest of the world reasserts its localized heritages, proud in their folk, ethnic and religious traditions, is Europe ashamed of hers?

As a rabbi, I am made uncomfortable when any religious expression is restricted, not only my own. But I naturally err on the side of the maintenance of traditions. They give a moral compass and a secure footing in an ever-changing technological and impersonal world. They show us where we have come from and where we are going, and that is the basis of the humility of man and the ultimate equality and mutual responsibility of all of us.

The Bible, the root of our common Judeo-Christian heritage, states over and over again the importance of welcoming the stranger. That too is part of our European identity.

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If we do have a shared common identity, we should seek to share it with others. If we support pluralism we should not seek to deny it but rather rigorously proselytize it everywhere.

The proposals to ban the burqa in France and minarets in Switzerland, wrong in and of themselves, are not the answer to what is merely a knee-jerk reaction to the influx of immigrants from the Middle East to Europe and their increased religiosity when they get here, often as a reaction to an enforced permissiveness and radical secularism to which they were never granted the societal tools to deal with.

Ultimately, a mosque without a minaret can always continue to exist and teach any kind of religious tolerance or intolerance. I can even state personal experience in this regard. The dome of the building where I serve as rabbi, the Moscow Choral Synagogue, was removed by the Czarist authorities over a century ago in order not to offend local Christian Orthodox sensitivities and only replaced some 10 years ago. Similarly, a burqa can also be removed from a woman's face but she can still choose to teach love and respect for all God's creatures to her children or choose the path of extremism and teach the hate of everything Europe stands for.

The key to the success of integration and acculturation of Europe's immigrants is dependent on their integration into the public school system and later into the universities and workforce.

The culture of proscription and banning is alien to European culture and alien to preserving identity. It also gives exactly the opposite message that it seeks to convey.

If we want to bestow the notion of pluralism and a “live and let live” mentality on immigrants from totalitarian societies where all alternative religious expression, including Christian prayer-groups for foreign workers, is proscribed, Europe should be taking the lead in showing tolerance to religious pluralism.

It is the light of religious pluralism that will lead to the building of a world free of terrorism and hate.

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