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Papal example a rebuff to Swiss vote on minarets

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 30, 2009 NCR Today

tIn a surprise result, Swiss voters yesterday approved a constitutional ban on the construction of minarets, the tall spires on Islamic mosques from which the call to prayer is issued five times a day. The initiative was approved 57.5 to 42.5 percent by some 2.67 million voters. Only four of 26 cantons, or states, opposed it, granting the double approval that makes it part of the Swiss constitution.

tThe ban had been proposed by far-right political forces, and was denounced in the run-up to the vote both by the government and by a wide cross-section of religious leaders ? including the Catholic bishops? conference in Switzerland, which had issued a statement warning that ?fear is a poor counselor.?

Passage of the measure is considered the clearest expression to date of mounting anti-Islamic backlash in Europe, fueled by rising levels of immigration. Though counts vary, some analysts predict the overall Muslim population will level off at 15 percent of the European total.

In the context of yesterday?s result, it might be worth a brief trip down memory lane to June 21, 1995 ? the day that Europe?s largest mosque opened in Rome, complete with a 66-foot dome and a minaret. The Vatican actually supported the construction of the mosque against far-right opposition in Italy, and in some ways its response remains paradigmatic for the issues raised by the Swiss vote.

Italian Muslims first floated the idea of building a mosque in the 1930s, but were turned down by Mussolini unless a Catholic church could open simultaneously in Mecca. They asked again in 1973, when the Italian government was led by the ultra-Catholic Giulio Andreotti, who quietly consulted with Pope Paul VI. The response was that the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had endorsed freedom of religion, so the church would have no grounds for opposing the Muslim request.

The Saudi government largely funded construction of the mosque, which was completed more than twenty years later. It opened on June 21, 1995, and Pope John Paul II sent a message of both congratulations and challenge during his General Audience that day. (The event happened to fall on a Wednesday.) The pope praised the opening of the mosque, but also insisted on what?s come to be known as ?reciprocity? ? that Christians and other religious minorities in Islamic nations ought to have the same freedoms as Muslims now enjoy in the West.

The following is the full text of what John Paul had to say that day:

?Today, a great mosque is inaugurated in Rome. This event constitutes an eloquent sign of the religious freedom recognized for every believer. It?s significant that here in Rome, the center of Christianity and the seat of the successor of Peter, Muslims have their own place of worship in full respect of their freedom of conscience.?

?In an important moment such as this, unfortunately one must also emphasize that in some Islamic nations, similar signs of recognition of religious freedom are missing. How the world, at the threshold of the third millennium, is waiting for these signs!

?Religious freedom has by now become part of numerous international documents, and represents one of the pillars of contemporary civilization. In being happy that the Muslims may come together in prayer in the new mosque of Rome, I also express the lively hope that the right to express their own faith will be recognized for Christians and all believers in every corner of the world. To this end I pray to the Lord, and I invoke the intercession of Mary, his ever-virgin mother, who is also honored by the faithful of Islam.?

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The minaret controversy in Switzerland seems likely to become a new sticking point in the relationship between the West and Islam, one of the ten trends I outline in *The Future Church*. In his own recent book *The Difference God Makes*, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago wrote: "Among the dialogues [involving religions], that between Christians and Muslims promises to be the most significant for the future of the human race."

Europe is in many ways the new front line of this relationship. Here's some background on Islam in Europe from *The Future Church*:

"Rising Muslim immigration in Europe has set off special alarms across the Catholic world, raising the specter in some quarters of a demographic reversal of the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, which preserved Christendom from the Ottoman threat. In his book *The Cube and the Cathedral*, George Weigel imagines a future in which the meuezzin calls Muslims to prayer from St. Peter?s Basilica, and the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris has been turned into ?Hagia Sophia on the Seine ? a great Christian church become an Islamic museum.? Weigel is exaggerating to make a point, but his image nevertheless captures real fears held by many people.

"Given the struggles facing institutional Christianity in Europe, combined with the very real dangers of Islamic radicalism ? the Paris riots, the London bombings, the Theo van Gogh murder in Holland ? the case for panic is depressingly easy to make. Some Christian leaders, however, are more sanguine about how things might shake out in the long run. Realistically, they argue, Europe hasn?t been Christian for some time, so protecting the continent?s 'Christian identity' may be an anachronism. In that context, they believe the arrival of a large pool of new Europeans who share some basic spiritual and moral values with Christians may prove to be a boon, if a growing number of Muslims enter the middle class and make their peace with pluralism."

t"No one knows exactly how many Muslims are in Europe today, in part because some are undocumented, and in part because several European censuses do not inquire about religious orientation. Drawing upon various sources, the U.S. National Intelligence Council estimates that the Muslim population in the European Union rose from 5 million in 1985 to 15 million in 2005, representing 200 percent growth. The largest Muslim community in the EU zone is in France, with five million Muslims, or 8.3 percent of a population of 60.4 million. Germany is in second place with 3.5 million Muslims, or 4.3 percent of its population, and the United Kingdom has 1.6 million, or 2.7 percent of its population."

"By 2025, the National Intelligence Council projects a Muslim population in the EU of 28 million; by 2050 it anticipates 40 million, which would represent 15 percent of a population of roughly 500 million Europeans. (That estimate does not include the possibility of Turkey?s admission to the EU). In some nations, the Muslim share may be higher. By mid-century, Muslims could be 25 percent of the population in France and Germany."

"In Europe as a whole, however, some experts believe that the Muslim total will level off at around 15 percent. Philip Jenkins says that the best parallel may be to the Catholic population in the United States, which rose to 25 percent of the country quickly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and has subsequently remained stable. Among other things, declining fertility rates in the Middle East and North Africa suggest that current levels of immigration may not continue."

"Aside from fears of jihadist violence, today?s Catholic anxiety about Muslim immigration in Europe is also

related to politics. So far, swelling Muslim populations have benefitted the secular left in most countries, on the basis of support for multiculturalism, strong social welfare systems, and the Palestinians. Yet there?s also a rising chorus on the European left today critical of accommodation of Muslims, insisting that the secular values of the Enlightenment must be defended against what they see as religious extremists. In 2006, twelve left-leaning European intellectuals put out a manifesto suggesting that the real fault line runs between ?theocrats and democrats,? a taxonomy that seems to lump Muslims and observant Christians together. Many analysts believe the natural home of a European Muslim middle class will ultimately be center-right parties that defend traditional morality and a strong role for religion in public life. To some extent this future is now in Germany, where, as ironic as it may sound, a small but growing number of Muslims are becoming Christian Democrats."

"That this is not mere fantasy is suggested by the Philippines, where the current ruling party is known as the ?Christian Muslim Democrats,? a fusion of center-right parties of both Christian and Muslim inspiration. A historic peace deal in 1996 granting broad autonomy to the majority Muslim Mindinao region prompted many Filipino Muslims to reject armed insurgency, accepting peaceful insertion into the political system. Some experts see the experience as proof that antagonism can be converted into partnership under the right conditions."

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