

Swiss council of religions SCR
Schweizerischer Rat der Religionen
Conseil suisse des religions
Consiglio svizzero delle religioni

For Religious Coexistence in Peace and Freedom

Statement of the Swiss Council of Religions on the referendum initiative to ban the construction of minarets

Synopsis:

The Swiss Council of Religions decisively rejects the Minaret Initiative. The Council, which consists of leaders from the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, is dedicated to protecting religious peace in Switzerland and to strengthening trust among the churches and religious communities. The Minaret Initiative would bring about just the opposite. It instrumentalizes religion for political aims and engenders mistrust among the populace.

The freedoms guaranteed by the Federal Constitution form a foundation for the peaceful and respectful coexistence of people of different religions and cultures in Switzerland. Everyone has the right in this country to live their faith visibly, freely, and in a community within the framework of the public order. This also includes the construction of places of worship that are typical for their respective religion.

The Swiss Council of Religions supports integration instead of exclusion, as every human being is a divine creation from the point of view of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Ways must be found to deal with differences and to live together in peace and mutual respect for each other and for each other's beliefs. This requires a dialogue at all levels. Any measures that contribute to creating trust should therefore be supported.

The Swiss Council of Religions views the freedom of religion as a basic universal right. The Swiss Council of Religions thus attempts, within the limits of its possibilities and contacts, to assert its influence in situations of religious discrimination, marginalization, and persecution in other countries.

Introduction

The initiative to ban the construction of minarets was submitted with just under 115,000 signatures on July 8, 2008, and will be voted on by the people in a referendum on November

29, 2009. The referendum would amend the Federal Constitution with a new Article 72, Paragraph 3, literally stipulating: «The construction of minarets is prohibited».

The Swiss Council of Religions rejects this initiative. The Council, which is composed of leaders from the Swiss Bishops' Conference, the Council of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, the Christian Catholic Church of Switzerland, the Orthodox churches in Switzerland, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, and the Islamic organizations of Switzerland, is active in the protection and support of religious peace. The Council works towards building trust between the religious communities and towards a dialogue on current questions involving the politics of religion. The members of the Swiss Council of Religions have the official mandate of their churches and religious communities, providing the basis for the Council's statement on the issues, goals, and effects of the referendum initiative in question.

Cultural diversity makes Switzerland strong

Switzerland, a country with a Christian background and a variety of cultures, confessions, and languages, is distinguished by its diversity. This diversity has, moreover, recently increased as the result of globalization and worldwide migration. Switzerland's religious landscape has also been affected by these changes. The very foundation of the Swiss Council of Religions is indeed an expression of this cultural change.

Switzerland has known cultural diversity for a long time. It is part of its history and characteristic of the Swiss identity. The people of this country have developed rules and systems of coexistence in the course of a long common history. The resulting rules are such an integral part of the cultural tradition of the country that its people are hardly aware of them in explicit terms; and at the center of this democratic self-image lies in the recognition of the freedom of each individual within the framework of a legal order that is equally binding for all.

The rights to individual freedoms as guaranteed by the constitution, both then and today, constitute an indispensable foundation for a peaceful and respectful coexistence. Today, they are particularly essential for churches and religious communities to interrelate and live side by side.

The challenge of enabling, ensuring, and strengthening social cohesion in the face of cultural diversity, is therefore hardly a new one. Switzerland can draw from its experience when it comes to taking on this task. Whenever it has grappled with its values, Switzerland has always emerged strengthened. Cultural diversity thus serves to make Switzerland strong.

The right to public presentation and religious practice

People do not live in isolation, but religions – in communities that are built on trust and in which are conducive to relationships – constitute a central element of the cultural conditions necessary for human life. Religious life is primarily life in community, and it is the adherents to a religion who themselves decide how to run their community, live their faith, and worship God. The Swiss Council of Religions is firm in its support for the right of religious communities, guaranteed in the constitution and law, to freely and autonomously define, form, and practice their faith. According to the constitution and the declaration of human rights, the freedoms of opinion, religion, and worship are all to be honored as long as they do not infringe upon other basic rights.

For the members of a religious community, religious buildings are not only places to gather but also a symbol of their faith and an expression of their reverence for God. For many Muslims, therefore, mosques need to have minarets. The prohibition of minarets would injure these people in their dignity and their basic right to practice their religion, but would not impact the religion itself, as the supporters of the initiative would like to have one believe.

Respect for people of a faith necessarily includes the acceptance of different forms of expression. The federal constitution explicitly protects the public presentation and practice of one's faith within the framework of the constitutional state.

The common basis of religions: Human beings as creatures of God

The Swiss Council of Religions intentionally focuses on those who live and express their faith as members of religious communities. Whether from a Jewish, Christian, or Islamic understanding, every human being is a creature of God. As creatures of God, all people are fundamentally equal and connected with one another. Whether formed as «the best of all creations» (Islam) or «in God's image» (Judaism/Christianity), human beings are called upon to be active in molding their own lives and their lives together with others in the world. In faithful obedience, they are responsible to God, themselves, and their fellow people. All three religions thus stress the fundamental significance of community, one which by no means is limited to the adherents to one's own religious community, but which in fact includes *all* people.

People are more than just representatives of their religion. The Swiss Council of Religions would like to encourage a differentiation between religious beliefs and treatment of individuals. Claims to religious truths do not justify treating people in different ways. Religions must not be misused for religious purposes. The religion's messages are directed toward and never against people.

These commonalities among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam constitute a common foundation upon which the differences and conflicts among the religions can be outlined and worked through – and must be worked through. It is in nobody's interest to suppress differences and ignore conflicts. On the contrary – religious communities can become examples for how people can disagree in their understandings and convictions in a serious and respectful manner. This also includes the recognition of insurmountable barriers.

Not answering injustice with further injustice

The dialogue among the churches and religious communities of Switzerland shows that differences of religion, culture, tradition, and social-political views do not preclude a deep common belief that all people share the same inalienable dignity. The fundamental rights to the freedom of belief and conscience apply equally to all. The right to construct mosques and minarets can therefore not be made to depend on whether religious minorities enjoy the same religious freedoms in other countries. Answering injustice with further injustice would be a betrayal of Swiss values. For the Swiss Council of Religions, working for religious freedom in Switzerland and against restrictions on religious freedom in other countries are closely connected. No matter what particular religions are involved: Those who demand religious freedom for their own coreligionists in minority situations must not, when in the majority, deprive other minorities of the same rights. Supporting religious freedom must be a common concern for all religious communities – both here and throughout the entire world. The Swiss Council of Religions is also committed to this effort. The adherents of all religions should be able to conduct their worship publicly, with dignity, and in accordance with their religions, everywhere throughout the world.

Peace, freedom, and justice are concepts at the core of all the major world religions. The major religions indeed agree that peace, freedom, and justice cannot simply be declared, but are only real to the extent that they are actually upheld. These concepts are also demands that the religions place on the people and that need to be continually renewed and reimplemented.

The ability to exchange criticism is indeed integral to the peaceful coexistence of religions. Debates over differences must not be suppressed, but in fact have to be carried out. Criticism is always welcome when expressed with respect for the others and their differing convictions. Plans for building churches, synagogues, and mosques must therefore be prepared well in advance while taking the local population into consideration.

The minaret initiative does not solve any problems. On the contrary, it only contributes to suspicion, mistrust, and aggression against people of Muslim faith. The prohibition of minarets, moreover, would constitute a legal step backwards, as the Swiss people have already removed all religious exceptions from the federal constitution. Switzerland enjoys a long lib-

eral tradition, one that seeks out dialogue and works towards a common learning process. The country recognizes that the true challenge lies in finding ways for all of the society's members to live together despite any differences among them.

Taking differences seriously and supporting a dialogue

The signatures gathered for the referendum initiative lend expression to the people's fears and concerns. What messages will be preached in the mosques? Is Islam more than just a religion? What significance do human rights, democracy and rule of law, and the equality of men and women have from a Muslim point of view? Does Islam seek the status of an exception in Switzerland due to its religious precepts? These questions and others like them will be asked and require discussion.

The Swiss Council of Religions calls for concrete measures to actively support the integration of Switzerland's Islamic communities. This can include, among other things, regular meetings of mosque officials with the local population, the opening of mosques and Islamic culture centers to non-Muslims at particular times, the founding of local interreligious discussion groups, and language classes for imams in one of our country's languages. We need to find other ways of dealing with different people than is evident in the minaret initiative. To this end, it can be helpful to focus more on the people as individuals, as it is indeed a question of individual people from different cultures, people with a different religion, and people with different ways of life.

As mentioned above, there are differences among the churches and religious communities that need to be taken seriously. The question that remains is how to deal with the differences and how best to form the society. It is the aim of the Swiss Council of Religions to bring forth a new approach to dialogue in mutual respect for each other and for each other's convictions. Even before the Declaration of Human Rights, the freedom of religion and conscience had already served as a measure for whether the dignity of every individual was truly observed and protected.

The Swiss Council of Religions views itself as part of this tradition and is committed to working for a future in which the freedom of religion and conscience remains a yardstick for judicious, open, and humane policies. It is a society's treatment of minorities and people of different religions that determines whether the society observes, respects, and protects the dignity of all its members.

Bern, September 2, 2009 / Swiss Council of Religions