

For Your Information

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When most people picture Western Europe, they envision well-established democracies where fundamental freedoms are vigorously protected. For the most part, this portrait is accurate. However, when it comes to religious freedom, the past year and decade have witnessed trends that challenge this image.

As 2012 draws to a close, a number of countries continue restricting religious practice and expression, from religious dress to fundamental life rituals such as circumcision. Such restrictions not only compromise internationally protected rights, they fuel an environment in which religious people and members of religious minorities in particular are sometimes made to feel like outsiders in their home countries.

These infringements are surprisingly widespread.

For example, France and Belgium bar students in state schools and government workers from wearing “conspicuous religious symbols,” forbidding the Islamic headscarf, the Sikh turban, large Christian crosses, and the Jewish yarmulke.

France and Belgium now ban people from publicly wearing full-face veils while Switzerland, the Netherlands, and other European states have debated similar prohibitions. Islamic dress restrictions for teachers exist in some Swiss and German states.

France also forbids people from wearing any headgear in official identity document photos. In 2011, the UN Human Rights Committee concluded that this rule violated the religious freedom rights of a Sikh man who refused to remove his turban for a residency-card photo. France has yet to take corrective action.

Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland have long banned kosher and halal slaughter. In 2011, the Dutch parliament’s lower house also passed such a ban, but an outcry from Muslim and Jewish groups forced the government to forge a compromise allowing religious animal slaughter to continue.

After a similar outcry in Germany this year against a lower-court ruling criminalizing religious circumcisions of male children, the German parliament is considering a law permitting this practice.

Efforts against religious circumcision persist in other parts of Europe. Norway's Center Party, a small party in parliament, has sought to criminalize it, and the ombudsman for children—an independent governmental body—has suggested that Muslims and Jews replace circumcision with “a symbolic, non-surgical ritual.”

In Germany and Sweden, government authorities have told Christian and Jewish parents that they cannot homeschool their children for religious reasons.

Government officials in the United Kingdom are forcing Catholic adoption agencies to shut down because they follow religious criteria in placing children with families.

What is driving this rise in restrictions? At least two factors are at play – one historical, the other demographic.

The first factor is Western Europe's unfortunate history of monolithic state religion. The rise of secular states did little to change the idea of a religious monoculture—it just included secularism as one of the monocultures. Indeed, “lay” states such as France and Turkey have long enforced secularism as the only acceptable form of behavior in public affairs, while countries like Norway treat their official churches as vestigial organs.

The second factor is the region's growing religious diversity, including a rising population of Muslims. The distinctive dress of conservative Muslims has fueled a fear of “the other” as well as a doubling down in already-existing opposition to public religious expression. While governments cite the need for national security, restrictions on religious expression risk creating exactly the opposite outcome. They drive a wedge between governments and their Muslim citizens, dashing hopes for much-needed cooperation to prevent radicalization and promote the assimilation of democratic values and identity in Muslim communities.

Couched as attempts to protect established values, government laws and policies prohibiting religious expression and practice specifically violate human rights. Such actions defy internationally recognized religious-freedom standards established in United Nations treaties and also protected by European human rights documents from the European Union, Council of Europe and Helsinki process.

These standards guarantee the right not just to believe but to manifest one's beliefs, individually or in community with others, in public or in private, through worship, observance, practice and teaching. This includes the right to wear distinctive symbols, clothing or head coverings, follow dietary rules and practice rituals connected with certain life stages. Any

limitations on these freedoms must be narrowly construed and based on grounds specified by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They must not discriminate in application, destroy guaranteed rights or derive from a single tradition alone.

The increasing restrictions on religious practice and expression in Western Europe both arise from and encourage a climate of intolerance against religious groups, especially those with strong truth claims and vigorous demands on their members. Muslims, in some instances, clearly are being targeted. This increasingly hostile atmosphere in turn triggers private discrimination, and sometimes even violence, against members of these groups.

Indeed, according to the U.S. State Department's *International Religious Freedom Report* on France, the number of anti-Muslim assaults, harassment, and vandalism increased 34 percent in 2011.

If the lamp of liberty is to remain lit, Western Europeans must accept that the age of conformity to an official monoculture—secular or religious—is at an end. In the coming year, their countries should embrace their religiously diverse future and accord religious freedom to all.

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