



## Faith and Secularism. The New Global Context. A European Perspective

31.03.2015 | Pinchas Goldschmidt\*

*The twentieth century was the most secular century in history, and it was the bloodiest ever recorded. Two secular ideologies, National Socialism and Communism swept the European continent. National Socialism was destroyed by the Allies and Communism imploded peacefully. The West built a secular post-Christian society, where religion was relegated to the back burner.*

The twenty first century returned religion to the forefront of politics. 9/ 11 brought the struggle of Islamic Fundamentalism to the shores of the civilized world. As a result the world changed. The USA which prided itself in its openness and accessibility, has become a fortress eyeing any foreigner with suspicion, demanding the fingerprints of every visitor. Private banking and numbered accounts disappear in front of our eyes all over the world, as the US is trying to stop the flow of funding to terrorist organizations.

The wars, struggles and instability in the Middle East brought millions of Middle Eastern immigrants to the shores of Europe, altering the European religious and electoral landscape. As the secular European birth rate plummeted, immigration from Muslim countries reached unprecedented heights. Today, in France, there are more Muslims going to mosques on Fridays than Christians going to church on Sundays. One fourth of the children in the Netherland school system is Muslim.

And the immigrants brought with them terror. Islamic terrorists have targeted planes, trains and subways in England and Spain, forcing almost all air travellers to take off their shoes and get rid of their toiletries before they access a plane.

But Jews are the prime target of the Islamists. Two brutal terrorist attacks on European soil, one against a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012 and one recently in a Jewish museum in Brussels, has put Europe on alert, forcing the EU, which tried to limit itself to a economic union, to create a common security policy for the EU.

Currently more than 1500 young Europeans are believed to have gone to the Middle East to join the Jihad of ISIS or of other Islamists group, creating a new challenge for Europe, once they return.

As a result many Europeans have taken a strong disliking to Islam. A few weeks ago fifteen thousand Germans demonstrated in Dresden against the "Islamization of Europe". A year ago, a Tilder Institut Montaigne poll found that all religions in France are regarded positively by 73% of Frenchmen – except for Islam, which is regarded negatively by fully 73 percent of Frenchmen. According to an Ipsos/Le Monde, poll, 74% find Islam "intolerant" and 80% believe it is "forcing its ways on French society at large." A parallel poll conducted in Germany last year yielded similar results, with 70% associating Islam with "fanaticism and radicalism," 64% calling it "prone to violence," and 60% citing its penchant for "revenge and retaliation." What is most important, Fifty Three percent of Germans foresee a battle between Islam and Christianity.

They are wrong, it is not a battle between Islam and Christianity, but between Islam and a growing intolerant militant secular Europe. But while Islam might be the primary target of the latest xenophobic European campaigns against circumcision and ritual slaughter, European Jewry is, as so well put by Mati Wagner, the "collateral damage" in this anti-Muslim offensive. The most glaring example of this was when Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front Party who won 18% of the vote in the 2012 French presidential elections, endorsed a ban on religious headwear – including kippot -- in public.

The attacks against Jewish ritual has been increasing, culminating now in the recommendation of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly resolution to recommend the banning of male circumcision altogether. In other countries, Kosher slaughtering of animals has been outlawed. Professor Robert Wistrich, head of Hebrew University's Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of anti-Semitism writes that the latest attacks in Europe against the ritual aspects of Judaism such as circumcision and Shechita are seen by the Jewish communities of Europe, as more dangerous to organized Jewish communal life than other forms of anti-Semitism such as anti-Zionism.

The rise of Islam in Europe, and the fear of Islamization of the continent has triggered greater support for the far right in France, Holland and Scandinavia, which has been supporting immigration quotas and laws, which will limit religious expression in buildings, dress and food. In other countries, Neo Fascist parties like Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary are raising the flag of political anti-Semitism.

The situation today in Europe can be described as two trains racing with ever increasing speed towards each other on the same track.

On one hand, Jewish synagogues and youth are being attacked by extremists, especially in many Western European Countries. A quarter of respondents in a survey of Jews from nine European countries said, they avoid visiting places and wearing symbols that identify them as Jews for fear of anti-Semitism. In France, 40 percent of approximately 1,200 Jews said, they avoided wearing such items in public, followed by Belgium with 36 percent, according to preliminary results from the survey. In total, 22 percent of respondents said they avoided "Jewish events or sites" because of safety concerns. Thousands of French Jews have emigrated from France and thousands more are in the process. This is one train.

From the other side, another train is coming, old Europe is again manifesting relatively new forms of disguised, politically correct, anti-Semitic expressions that had remained largely latent since the Holocaust. I would like to stop these moving trains, before it is too late, and as the representative of one of the oldest European minority faiths on this continent, reach out to the diverse Christian communities, the diverse Muslim communities, the secular groups, governments and parliamentarians, to help us stop this brewing antagonism and conflict, which might be the greatest danger for the unity and safety of Europe for the years to come. I believe that we have the responsibility to recreate an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect between the secular modern state and the religious movements, in order to make sure that the experiment, which is called Europe, is not going to fail.

The broadside attack against religion in general and Islam in particular, as we have seen lately through restrictive laws against religious expression and the widening circles of protests against Muslims in Germany by PEGIDA is wrong and counter productive. Islam can be practiced peacefully by millions of people who are calling Europe their new home.

The ones to be targeted by Europe, if we want to live without fear of attacks such as Toulouse, Brussels and Michel Hebdô's headquarters in Paris, are the radical fundamentalists, who are a menace for all of Europe. The thousands of youths, who are sympathising with ISIS and the

hundreds who joined them on the battlefield and return to Europe are a bigger danger than Al Qaida was to the USA.

While nationalism and socialism in its moderate state is the driving forces in politics in democracies, both movements in its extreme forms have proved to be mortal poison for democracies and driving forces for armed conflict. The distance between radical Islam as practiced by ISIS, Hamas and Al Qaida and mainstream Islam, is as far, as the distance between National Socialism and moderate nationalism.

Instead of alienating the great majority of peaceful Muslims, who try to seek a dignified existence in Europe, the broadside attack against the soft target religious symbols of Islam such as Halal, circumcision, Minarets and the Burka, radical Islamic preachers, websites, movements and cells should be diagnosed, isolated and destroyed. The cheap demagoguery of the extreme right against Muslim immigration not only fails to solve the problem, but pushes the moderate immigrant into the claws of the extremists.

We have to isolate and stop the extremist among us who call to murder our fellow citizens and we propose the EU and the member countries to implement a program, which has been published as the "Manifesto for Combatting Religious Extremism" by the CER recently.

We, the Jewish people as a small minority, are again in the eye of the brewing storm, in the middle of the clash of civilizations in Europe. We are the world biggest experts, of how to survive and thrive as a minority in a different society and culture, and we extend our arms to all Europeans in order to reset the equilibrium between all different parts of our civil society. We are the people standing on the tracks and looking at both trains coming moving towards each other at ever greater speed.

It is our mission to let our voice be heard in our communities and in our cities, that G-d has created every man and woman in his image, every man has his own distinct and different image, which makes him different from all other human beings. There is no hope for humanity, if we do not tolerate each other, and if we do not respect each others differences. We, for thousands of years fought for the right to think differently and to eat differently, to rest on a different day, and to speak a different language. It is this message which you should bring to all Europeans.

Europe is not going to be saved by European countries and European institutions adapting Middle Eastern practices of intolerance towards minorities, but by introducing new Europeans to the values of pluralism and mutual respect, expelling from our midst those voices, whether religious or secular, which call to destroy the common home, not the hotel, which we are trying to build. The voice, which calls the faithful in a mosque to bomb planes, and the voice, which calls on ending freedom of religion in Europe, are both equally dangerous to the future of Europe. Let us stop both trains and tell the people to step out, see each other and speak to each other and respect each other.

\*Pinchas Goldschmidt is President of the Conference of European Rabbis. His text above was published in January 2015 on the [European Rabbis' website](#).