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"My Compatriots' Vote to Ban Minarets is  
Fuelled by Fear" by Tariq Ramadan*

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## On Visibly Dangerous Silliness

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## On Visibly Dangerous Silliness

### Abstract

“Silly” is what Ramadan calls the Swiss minaret referendum. He urges, in response to its passage, that Swiss Muslims be more rather than less visible. Each point is worth reflection. How and why does silliness transform itself into danger? And how and why is visibility the correct response to such danger—even if it leads in directions Ramadan may not suspect?

### Keywords

Human rights, Switzerland, Minarets, Freedom of religion, Political rights, Religious discrimination, Muslims

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## On Visibly Dangerous Silliness

by Anthony Chase

“Silly” is what Ramadan calls the Swiss minaret referendum. He urges, in response to its passage, that Swiss Muslims be more rather than less visible. Each point is worth reflection. How and why does silliness transform itself into danger? And how and why is visibility the correct response to such danger—even if it leads in directions Ramadan may not suspect?

So...silly? Indeed it is. Banning Switzerland’s minarets is about as commonsensical as banning french fries in favor of “freedom fries” in the US Congress cafeteria. Each is an irrelevant response to an invented enemy. The Swiss case, in particular, reminds us of the human need for scapegoats—usually some disempowered group—that is behind so many human rights violations. Apparudai calls this a “fear of small numbers,” i.e., the anxiety felt by dominant groups when faced with assertions of difference in the public sphere. This often leads to explosions of violence targeting ethnic minorities, women, or others who move out of the private realm to stake out a public presence. Puncturing the myth of a pure, patriarchal national whole by merely existing—by publicly showing a face or speaking a language or erecting a symbol of religious belief—is dangerous business. Its signal that identities are multiple and political societies are inescapably pluralistic rebukes claims to monopolize power based on representing a singular identity. Hence the anxiety and hence the danger.

What is the precise danger in this “silly” referendum? It is most easily read as an attack on freedom of religion—combined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ Article 18, intriguingly, as “freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” Article 18 may usefully be considered in terms of how it is followed by Article 19’s rights to freedom of opinion and expression. What is being attacked in Switzerland is not religion per se—a minaret is an expression of Islam, but is irrelevant to its practice. What is being attacked is the right to publicly express an identity, something that falls under Article 19’s orbit. Or, to be more explicit, Article 18’s freedom of thought, conscience, and religion leads to expressions that are protected by Article 19. The two are inextricably linked.

And here is where things get interesting. If I am right that what is really at stake here is freedom of expression, then this connects quite logically to Ramadan’s call for a response that involves greater visibility for Muslims. In human rights terms he is arguing that, rather than shrinking away from “provoking” attacks, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is only protected if it is paired with freedom of opinion and expression—including the right to visibly express an identity via symbols such as a minaret.

This has analogies in other controversies in the transnational Muslim world. Scholars such as [Nasr abu Zeid](#), novelists such as [Salman Rushdie](#), and Iranian dissidents such as [Eshkevari](#), [Soroush](#), and [Kadivar](#) have been attacked for being “provocative”—i.e., for expressing their freedom of thought in ways that roiled dominant notions of a singular, monolithic identity. What made them dangerous to authorities had little to do with their having been provocatively insulting, any more than a minaret is insulting. Attacks in each case were led by nationalist elites who used the guise of “provocation” as a basis to attack critical speech by dissenters against the political-cultural status quo. Protecting such putative provocation—be it in dry treatises, post-

modern novels, or minarets—is essential. Their repression not only limits free expression, but also enables political societies to avoid coming face-to-face with their inherent pluralism. Those are important stakes and why, however silly the reaction, the proper response is more visibility.

Let me end by noting Ramadan's oblique reference that "every European country has its specific symbols or topics through which European Muslims are targeted...[it is] homosexuality in the Netherlands." Perhaps I am wrong, but Ramadan seems to equate the right of Muslims to object to homosexuality in Holland to their right to erect minarets in Switzerland. This odd conflation leads me to reiterate Ramadan's point regarding visibility, but to extend it to sexual minorities. There have been controversies regarding sexuality in many parts of the transnational Muslim world, including areas where Muslims are minorities ([as in Holland](#)) and majorities (as in [Iran's death penalty for homosexuality](#) or Egypt's famous [Queen Boat case](#)). Some have argued that those with a "gay" identity should refrain from "provocatively" claiming public space.

Nothing could be more dangerous. For the same reason that Ramadan rightly urges Muslims to maintain their visibility, it is imperative that other vulnerable minorities inform the public sphere with their presence. If not, that public sphere is left monopolized by the sort of xenophobes who recently won a referendum in Switzerland, and who stand against the inescapable pluralism of human societies.

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*Anthony Tirado Chase is Associate Professor of Diplomacy & World Affairs at Occidental College. Chase is currently completing [Human Rights Debates in the Transnational Muslim World: Politics, Economics, and Society](#). Drawing on Professor Chase's training in international law, Islamic law, and international relations theory, this book explores when, how, and why the international human rights regime has mattered to some of the transnational Muslim world's most important debates - including those over free expression, economic development, and the treatment of sexual minorities. Other forthcoming works include "Mutual Renewal: On the Relationship of Human Rights to the Muslim World" and "On Justifications for Human Rights in Difficult Circumstances: Why 'Pushing the Envelope' is Essential to Human Rights Continued Global Resonance," each scheduled to be published as chapters in edited volumes. Previous works include [Human Rights in the Arab World: Independent Voices](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press), a range of peer reviewed articles, and guest editorship of a Muslim World Journal of Human Rights special volume on [The Transnational Muslim World, Human Rights, and the Rights of Women and Sexual Minorities](#).*