

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 37 (2010)
Heft: 2

Buchbesprechung: Le dernier crâne de M. de Sade [Jacques Chessex]
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Minaret referendum

Response to "Ashamed" (Jan 2010) The world citizen in Bavaria who feels so ashamed of his Swiss nationality could solve his problem by simply sending his Swiss passport back to Berne. The Swiss people expressed a valid opinion in a free democratic vote, and the letter writer ought to be pleased that there is at least one state left where popular opinion still counts for something. There are plenty of people who would value an opportunity to make their voices heard.

To those who believe that "religious freedom" is in jeopardy, I can only assert that this is not true – rather, it is a sign to those in authority to wake up to reality. A. KOBELT, GERMANY

Response to Mr de Coulon, "Ashamed" (Jan 2010) It is eminently clear that the minaret ban has nothing to do with a restriction on religious freedom. Nowhere in the Koran does it say that mosques must have minarets. Muslims in Switzerland are still free to worship at mosques without any fear of persecution. The same cannot be said for Christians and those of other religious faiths in Muslim countries, where religious freedom and human rights are regularly and brutally trampled on. Why not speak up for these persecuted minorities instead?

You may be interested to know that surveys after the Swiss referendum revealed that 77% of Germans and 87% of Dutch would have voted the same way. P. KÜNDIG, SPAIN

Response to Mr de Coulon, "Ashamed" (Jan 2010) Accusing the Swiss people of imposing an "ignoble restriction on religious freedom" is an unacceptable slur. How is it that worshippers at Switzerland's 156

mosques without minarets have got along just fine without a permit to build a minaret? Presumably because they have still been able to freely practise their religion and all these mosques have been fulfilling their designated function, in some cases for decades. Why is it that there are plenty of Christian churches both in Switzerland and abroad that manage without a church steeple, but in some Islamic countries it is forbidden even to carry a pocket Bible?

How did we arrive at a situation where our federal councillors abroad have felt obliged to apologise for an initiative that was twice given the "yes" vote – once by a popular majority, and once by a majority of the cantons? These federal councillors have simply demonstrated how far removed they are from the people they are supposed to represent.

Let us not forget that Swiss politics works from the bottom up, unlike most European "democracies" where people may have the right to vote, but not to influence actual decisions. U. PETER, NAMIBIA

Excellent idea

In January I read the electronic version of "Swiss Review" for the first time and was extremely impressed. Older readers can even enlarge the text size to make it easier on the eyes. Perhaps the pages could even be arranged one under the other instead of side by side as in the printed edition. This would make reading easier, without having to scroll this way and that all the time.

Personally I think the electronic magazine is an excellent idea. R. PFISTER, CANADA

Swiss values

When Martin Baltisser, general secretary of the SVP, says

One last peak before going to heaven.

We should be glad that the writer Jacques Chessex left us with his posthumous book "Le dernier crâne de M. de Sade" (The Last Skull of M. de Sade). On sale in French-speaking Switzerland wrapped in a cellophane cover with the warning "adults only", Chessex's final novel explores the private life of the last months of the life of the Marquis de Sade, a writer who fought against morality and the Church. Of course, it is impossible not to enter into the realms of pornographic literature popularised by this dissenter and for which he spent more than thirty years of his life in prison, where he in fact died. The old marquis' scenes of debauchery are inescapable. His slow death takes us to his grave where he was buried in December 1814. It is there that the adventure of his skull begins four years later when

Doctor Ramon takes it from his grave when the cemetery is being reorganised. The epic, supernatural story of this relic begins at this point: "Never before had he held in his hands, or seen with his eyes, anything as distinctive and beautiful as the skull of M. de Sade, of which the bone itself gleams, the sockets look and see, the jaw ironically smiles a triumphant smile and speaks, yes speaks, all the words of the marquis' works and philosophy." One of the doctor's colleagues gets hold of the famous skull and, before it disappears, has time to take a cast of it and release some copies onto the mysticism market because this is something that rouses desire. "It's off, it's off, it's the true skull. The first and the last. It hasn't finished causing a stir yet." We follow its path up until 2009. We discover the wrongdoing, malediction and fascination that it causes. A touch of genius from Chessex, the narrator suddenly becomes a protagonist and goes in search of the skull. He finds it in Berto, a village in the plain of the Rhône. His descriptive language is magnificent. "I arrived at four o'clock when the afternoon turns russet and smoke is already rising in the black breaks in the valleys. The air smelt of thyme warmed on the slopes, overripe chestnut and the suint of a flock near to which the intermittent barking of a dog is heard." As if he has a sixth sense, Chessex looks for his own reflection in the relic: "I was looking for a skull. And I know it only too well. A skull, a hollowness more ironic, more tenacious and more tightly set on its rounded bone - its hollowed sockets and the smile of its ruined jaw - than any other object of desire or repulsion, mask or deceptive device, capable of temporarily distracting me from my true destiny." He dares to ask the fatal question: "Was this skull my own to remind me of my own fate?" And in conclusion, as if to a supernatural friend, the author confides: "Often a valuable object, it spoke to me with genuine kindness, as if approving of me and encouraging me to keep away from the noises of the world, and, more sombrely, warning me of impending death."

Le dernier crâne de M. de Sade, by Jacques Chessex, Édition Grasset, 2010.