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The Church in crisis

I am not an authority on Swiss ecclesiastical issues. But one thing is clear to me: what is happening today is simply the fruit of seeds sown long ago. Decades ago I had the dubious pleasure of witnessing how figures who shape cultural life discarded and even vilified their native cultural heritage and tradition with incomprehensible recklessness – biting the hand that feeds them, as it were – in exchange for empty theoretical notions that they could barely understand, such as the adulation of Mao and Ayatollah Khomeini. This individualist culture has increasingly moved towards a rejection of tradition as cultural identification. The renouncement of the Church today is

also an indication of this, and a worrying one at that.

ARYE OPHIR, K-YAM, ISRAEL

Return to Switzerland

We have lived in Dubai for nine years as Swiss abroad. Our eldest son, who is 19, is now returning to Switzerland to study and to attend military training school. He requires a “certificate of good conduct” for this. He was told by officials in Switzerland that this had to be obtained from the Dubai police force and then attested at the consulate. At the consulate it was explained to him that this could only be done once he had obtained confirmation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the official signatory was actually

authorised to issue a certificate. The consulate would then attest the certificate of “good conduct”.

We had always assumed that it was the noble duty of a consulate to help us Swiss abroad to verify such documents. We have now discovered that we as citizens, who are far less well connected and trained in administrative matters, have to do this ourselves. The consulate then merely signs the result of these efforts. It makes you wonder when a ministry of foreign affairs abroad has to provide a Swiss representation with an attestation on one of its own officials so that a foreign document can allow a young Swiss citizen to carry out compulsory mili-

tary service. What will we have to do for officials next?

TONI WIRZ, DUBAI, UAE

Everyone is under suspicion

The tax agreements between Switzerland and other states will put every Swiss citizen abroad under suspicion of tax evasion. Is this mistrust justified? The Austrian financial authorities have never shown any interest in my account statements in Austria. And the Swiss banks are timidly retreating. A sledgehammer is being used to crack a walnut. Who is the offender here?

MAX BÜHLMANN,
VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Focus on education

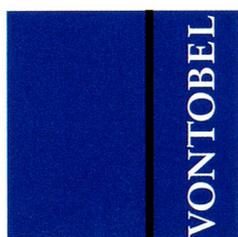
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Review" with interest. I completed an apprenticeship as my initial training. The vocational school-leaving qualification was only introduced a year later. This did not disadvantage me professionally at first. Higher education courses in Switzerland were also open to me. I have been living in Luxembourg for seven years now. While I have had little difficulty in finding a good job, the question of what my apprenticeship and further qualifications are worth is continually raised in a career context. Your report says that the average number of people with school-leaving qualifications in OECD countries is twice as high as in Switzerland. I now understand the lack of understanding shown by employers in the EU towards job applicants without school-leaving qualifications.

I can also see how important it is to take higher education courses in order to reach the level of CAS (Certificate of Advanced Studies) and MAS (Master of Advanced Studies). Certain doors in the world of employment may otherwise remain closed, not due to a lack of specialist skills but because of inadequate qualifications. You can think what you will of the "Bologna" system but there is no way around it. Career opportunities in the EU and, for that matter, the world are only fully accessible with recognised qualifications.

STEFAN VON ARX, LUXEMBOURG

Bologna is not to blame

One of the main objectives of the Bologna reform was to make university degrees internationally comparable. This goal has not and will not be achieved. This is because the reform only governs de-

gree titles. Details concerning how demanding a degree should be have not been stipulated. Most universities have reviewed their existing study programmes and established a cut-off point after three years, maintaining that this is the bachelor level. A quality control system is supposed to exist, but in practice this only compares courses in the same country with one another.

A further objective of the Bologna reform was to increase the international mobility of students. Students are also encouraged to study for a shorter period. It is obvious that fast-track degrees will tend to follow established paths. These only include a period of study abroad in a few cases. Doing the entire degree at a university abroad following the paths established there is a more likely option. This will ideally be in the student's own mother tongue to speed up the process. This makes Switzerland an attractive study destination for Germans, French, Austrians and Italians. It is simply the case that a small country does not have as many citizens as a large one.

DR. DAVID N. JANSEN,
NIJMEGEN, THE NETHERLANDS

Shocking attitude

Mr. Hermann Meierhans' letter in the latest "Swiss Review" with the title "Shocking attitude" is shocking in itself. What does he know about the Tea Party? And why a degrading comment on both the TP movement and the traditional role of a woman in raising children? Does he believe that modern society has benefited from farming out the upbringing and care of children to nannies, babysitters, nurseries and libraries, etc.?

ARMIN KUNKLER, BONIFAY, USA

A thriller in the best tradition

SWISS NOVELS almost never make the shortlist for the prestigious French "Prix Goncourt" award. The last to do so was "L'Ogre" (The tyrant) by Jacques Chessex in 1973. This year, it was Joël Dicker of Geneva. At the tender age of 27, he has produced a real masterpiece in the form of his second book "La Vérité sur l'Affaire Harry Quebert" (The truth about the Harry Quebert affair), published in August. This 670-page tome is a breathtaking journey, from start to finish. Dicker's novel, which tops the fiction charts in French-speaking Switzerland and has received rave reviews in France, has the atmosphere of an American film noir, with a keen sense of the characters' psychology and of the mastery of suspense.

New York, early 2008. Marcus Goldman, a writer in his 30s, has become rich and famous with his first novel, but is struggling to find inspiration for the next, while his editor is pressuring him to deliver his manuscript. He turns to his mentor and former teacher Harry Quebert, also a highly acclaimed writer, and travels to New Hampshire, where Quebert lives. The move makes no difference; Goldman fails to find the elusive creative spark. After returning to New York, he learns several months later that Harry is accused of murdering a 15-year-old girl who disappeared in 1975, and whose body the police have discovered buried in his garden. Quebert had an affair with the girl, which inspired his masterpiece "Les Origines du Mal" (The roots of evil).

Goldman decides to carry out an investigation to exonerate his friend and find out the truth of what happened 33 years earlier. The chapters count down from 31 to 1 before the truth is finally revealed. The varied use of suspense, flashbacks, twists and character biographies heightens the tension of the plot. The novel is set against the backdrop of the US in 2008, with election campaigning in full swing,

and with all its media and judicial failings.

Dicker knows the US well: as a child, he spent his summers in New England, and has since travelled a great deal in the country. His work is both a lesson in humility and a tale of forbidden love or love triangles, and also dissects the creative process. Each chapter begins with a conversation between the master, Quebert, and his student, Gold-

man. "Your second chapter is extremely important, Marcus. It has to be incisive, powerful. (...) Like boxing. You're a right-hander, but in the guard position you always have your left fist in front: the first jab strikes your opponent, followed by a sequence with the right that knocks him out. That's what your second chapter should be: a right to the jaw for your readers." And that's exactly what we find in "La Vérité sur l'Affaire Harry Quebert": the feeling of a boxing match over more than thirty rounds, from which we are unable to turn away. This is a book that you won't be able to put down.

ALAIN WEY

