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Circumcision is not about the rights of the child

Barbara Amiel on religious ritual or ritual torture?

by Barbara Amiel on Tuesday, October 2, 2012 10:58 am - 30 Comments

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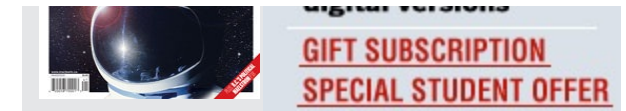
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Michael Nagle/New York Times/Redux

At the very end of Louis Malle's semi-autobiographical film *Au revoir les enfants*, set at a Catholic school in Nazi-occupied France, the Gestapo rounds up concealed Jewish pupils. One has escaped to the infirmary where Julien, who plays the 11-year-old Louis Malle, has brought a suitcase of clothes for a hidden boy. "Pull down your trousers," the SS man barks at Julien. We know he will pass inspection because Louis Malle was not a Jew.

Runter mit den hosen had the menace in those days of a Götterdämmerung motif. Along with *Juden raus* it is one of those raw commands that every Jew in Hitler's Europe dreaded. The most assimilated Jews of the time were usually circumcised and most non-Jews were not. Though circumcision is practised by Muslims, Islam had not



yet made any significant journey to Europe at the time of the Second World War. The bets were pretty good that if the foreskin had gone missing, the denuded penis belonged to a Jew.

We've come full circle. Last June a German court ruled that circumcision itself is a criminal act. The case in Cologne dealt with the circumcision of a four-year-old Muslim child by a Muslim physician. The doctor was charged with bodily harm by means of a dangerous instrument—his scalpel. He was acquitted on grounds that, though there was post-operative bleeding, his work was clinically correct and since the parents were of Muslim faith, he had no way of knowing this might be an illegal act. The court, however, decided to begin laying down grounds to criminalize circumcision in future on the basis that a child, let alone an infant, couldn't give voluntary consent, that a child might not want the religion of its parents and that the fundamental rights of the child must take priority. Subsequent to this case, two more German rabbis have been investigated by authorities.

Efforts to outlaw infant circumcision have been active for the past 75 years with attempts made in Finland, Denmark et al. and, not to take a back seat, our own Canadian Foreskin Awareness Project. Last year in California, the attempt to ban circumcision was repealed when Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill to outlaw the outlawing of it. The British Medical Society has been raising the “ethical” problems of performing a medically unnecessary operation for nearly a century. But the Cologne decision has, misleadingly, been attributed to the ghouls of German anti-Semitism. Charlotte Knobloch, a Munich-born Jew herself and former chairwoman of Germany's Central Council of Jews, has spent much of her life defending to Jews her decision to remain in Germany post-Second World War. “For the first time in my life,” she wrote in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “I seriously have to ask myself whether this country still wants us [Jews].”

One has to put this over-the-top reaction in context. How to conceal the circumcised penis was a matter of life and death for millions of terrified human beings caught for 12 dreadful years in that part of the world. “I was not allowed to pull my pants down to urinate,” Dr. Stanley Turecki, now a psychiatrist in New York City, who was in hiding in Vilnius, explains in the book *The Hidden Children*. Some Jewish boys were dressed as girls, soiling themselves as they tried desperately to sit and urinate. When the landlady renting rooms to Clem Loew's family in a Polish town demanded that he “take down your underwear” and his circumcision was revealed, the mother quickly told her that Clem was her son, but adopted. The landlady retreated, mollified.

It is ironic, I suppose, that the Jewish and Muslim community who cannot make common cause on any meaningful issue should come together on this comedy show. To make an anti-circumcision law based on the child's inability to choose is insanity: a child by definition cannot choose anything—whether breastfeeding or tonsillectomy. But so long as a child has parents who within common-sense parameters act in his best interests as they see them to be, we do not need judges or governments to make decisions *in loco parentis*. Because this is what the battle over the centimetres of foreskin is about—not Muslims and Jews versus anti-

Justin Trudeau: saviour, liability or 'meh'?

- ☐ Saviour, he's going to rebuild the Liberal party
- ☐ Liability. There's nothing there beyond his father's name.
- ☐ Meh. Saviour or liability I don't much care what happens to the Liberal party.
- ☐ Too soon to tell. Let's wait and see what he can do.

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Semites but the age-old battle between individual liberty and statism—in this case the individual family unit and the state. I’ve watched statism conceal itself in many a Trojan horse: multiculturalism, feminism, human rights and so on. This time children’s rights is the thin end of the wedge. And somewhere in Germany’s dank caves, the anti-Semites may howl but they are not the predator.

Ultimately, I think circumcision is mad—but that’s because I think most religious ritual is mad—whether it is bowing knees and heads down toward Mecca or reverently tasting bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. I personally carry out certain rituals associated with my faith as a Jew, even knowing them to be utterly illogical. They are my tribe’s rituals. Had I a male child, I feel certain I would have had him circumcised. But that would be my decision, not some advocacy commissar or Ontario judge. The medical evidence for and against circumcision is baffling. It seems to have helped prevent the spread of HIV infection and STIs—or maybe not. Statistics can be played contextually according to fashion. As for getting consent for circumcision—after reading what is involved in doing it to an adult male, I cannot believe that any man would be mad enough to consent. I am told there are men whose objects of affection are Jews and that circumcision is the price of winning their hearts. Foreskins off to them, I say, it’s clearly true love.

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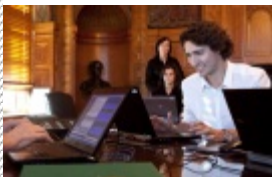
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