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Media: (Name of publication): Süddeutsche Zeitung (Gottes Haus)

Source language: German

Number of words in source language: 1471

Publication date: 13 November 2015

## God's House

*It's hard enough getting Muslims, Jews and Christians to talk to each other – let alone pray together. But this is exactly what's happening in Berlin, where a building is being planned that will bring these three world religions together to pray.*

A rabbi, a priest and an imam meet up. One of them says, "In the name of God, the Almighty", the second starts singing, and the third expresses his deep desire for peace on earth. Although this sounds like the lead in to a bad a joke, it's no laughing matter in Berlin. Here, these three clerics, in full vestments, stand at a kind of altar solemnly saying prayers.

But there's still the potential for a good punchline: the rabbi, the priest and the imam don't just want to pray together - they also want to build a house of God together.

The trio have their eyes set on Petriplatz, a square in the heart of Berlin. Currently an area of wasteland alongside a busy street, the view includes scaffolding, half-finished facades and construction cranes for as far as the eye can see. Rising on the horizon one can just make out a busy construction site, the reconstruction of the City Palace. This is one of the places where the German capital is busy reinventing itself, so it's only appropriate this enormous, ambitious project is happening here. Billed as the "House of One", the aim is to build a single sacred building for the three religions – one part of it for Jews, one for Christians and one for Muslims.

In 2012, an international architectural competition was launched to design a house of prayer and teaching. It was won by a Berlin firm. Donations have since been collected for the building work, which will cost a total of EUR 43 million, of which one million has been raised so far.

For the moment, the sandstone-coloured building, with a sort of tower in the middle, is no more than a model. But those who will one day be giving life to this house of God are already here. It is a dreary autumn afternoon, and Rabbi Andreas Nachama, Pastor Gregor Hohberg and Imam Kadir Sancı are conducting a meditative service on the occasion of September 11<sup>th</sup>, a day that split the world along religious lines like no other.

Standing under a white canvas stretched across an archaeological excavation site that lies on the Petriplatz, the three pray and sing. Here a few years ago the remains of a church were found, which will be incorporated into the new structure, with the old ruins becoming the new building's foundations. Quite a number of people have congregated around the clerics, men with kippas as well as women with headscarves. Candles burn, and someone plays the piano. The mood is solemn. There's a sense of longing for the assurance that faith alone can bring.



*(Left to right) Pastor Gregor Hohberg, Rabbi Andreas Nachama and Imam Kadir Sancı.*

*(Photo: Steffen Roth)*

Berlin is often thought of as a secular city. The number of those leaving the church is huge, and any visitor from the more religious south who says “Grüß Gott” (Good day – literally, [may] “God greet [you]”) is likely to face an immediate rebuff in the distinct Berlin dialect: “I’m not greeting any God – he doesn’t greet me either!” Despite this trend, “live and let live” remains the overriding principle here. Since Prussian times, when it comes to matters of faith, people have been free to choose the method of worship (if any) that suits them best. So if there was ever an appropriate place for a mosque-church-synagogue, then that place is Berlin.

Yet one big question remains: How is it going to work? This and other questions are posed to the three clerics, now sitting together in a small exhibition room around the corner from the building site. Sketches and photos of the “House of One” hang on the walls. Kadir Sancı shares a memory of growing up in Munich, where Muslim children on the playground used to whisper to each other “Whatever you do, don’t run under a church – you’ll turn into a Christian.” He teaches his young son, who is currently playing at a table by his side, that even though religions differ, they can be good together.

Perhaps the best way to describe the “House of One” is as a kind of commune for faith, all sharing one roof, with each having his own area. The original idea came from a Protestant church congregation. Hearing about it, rabbis were enthusiastic about it and, at some point, Berlin Muslims came on board too. But getting to this point wasn’t easy. Many Muslims refused to do anything with Jews, and the Jewish community in turn was suspicious of Muslim organisations. Whenever another conflict flared up in the Middle East, relations between Berlin Jews and Muslims got shaky.

“For more than three years we’ve been sitting together at a table talking about social problems and looking for answers,” says Sancı. For him, this in itself is quite an achievement, considering all that

must be sorted out. Everything down to what the three rooms will look like must be agreed to. Jews will need their own kitchen so that milk and meat can be kept separate, while Muslims will need washrooms and sufficient space to be able to pray shoulder to shoulder. The part that accommodates the mosque has to face Mecca, and the synagogue needs to be set up so men can be separated from women when orthodox Jews wish to use it. In the end, the trio agreed on a domed hall as a communal room surrounded by three block-type sections, differing in height and width and of various shapes. Internally, the three rooms are distinct from each other, while outwardly they still form a large, unified whole.

Parallel to this planning, plenty of other interreligious initiatives have emerged around the world – especially following 9-11. Multi-faith prayer rooms, open days for mosques and Christian-Jewish dialogues are just a few examples. In fact, the three Berlin clerics have just been invited to Rwanda, where a mosque-church is set to be built. Yet what sets the Berlin project apart from these other initiatives is its aspiration to create something enduring. A house for eternity.

This aspiration for eternity is fitting, as it is probably the one thing that all religions can agree upon. And the rabbi, the priest and the imam certainly seem to be in agreement as they sit here drinking tea and coffee. All three listen to what each other has to say, and it is only occasionally that someone adds something to what is being said, most often being “God willing”. As a result, a sense of harmony surrounds the meetings, leading some to call the project the “Ring Parable” after Lessing’s story of three rings, symbolising the world’s three religions, which cannot be distinguished from each other.

However, the three clerics aren’t so keen on the ring parable comparison. “Lessing was more interested in discovering which of the rings was the genuine one,” says Gregor Hohberg, who has a kind and measured way of speaking. “Lessing offers a kind of Olympic Games in ethics, and that is the very thing we don’t want.” Rabbi Nachama nods in agreement, and Imam Sancı adds that it’s a matter of variety, which is God-given. “If a firm is to be successful, they won’t engage ten employees to do exactly the same job. Instead, each employee will be hired to bring something unique to the table,” says Sancı. “That’s why I appreciate and value differences of opinion between people in the House of One.”

And where is God to be found within this house? “The Bible says that God’s name dwells in the Temple, wherever ten believers are together, or almost everywhere, says Rabbi Nachama, who is the son of a Cantor, an Auschwitz survivor. Pastor Hohberg adds to the conversation that God can come into the smallest cabin, as Luther said. “You can’t confine him to anywhere,” says Imam Sancı. All three nod.

Oddly enough, it’s precisely this claim to be all-embracing that attracts the most criticism. Some critics are afraid that no communal life will develop in a house like this. People like the Catholic author Martin Mosebach miss the religious symbols typically found in a Christian church, and Imam Sancı regularly receives e-mails quoting a verse from the Qur’an that says Muslims are not to befriend Jews and Christians. Although that verse does exist, according to Sancı, who teaches religious studies at the University of Potsdam, just a few lines further the text clarifies that this only applies to those who bear malice in their heart. Everyone else can get along fine.

The hybrid nature of the project is particularly interesting. On the one hand, the House of One is a house of God times three, with an abundance of religious devotion that will one day be set in stone. For this very reason, on the other hand, everyone has to make concessions in their religious

observances. In other words, fundamentalists who regard their own particular expression of faith as the only true one will not be at home here.

Prayer is now in full swing here at the Petriplatz. Rabbi Nachama says that the word peace (*Friede*), comes from *Einfrieden* (enclosure) and means that one should not erect fences, but aspire to something complete. The imam sings a song in Arabic, and everyone prays the Lord's Prayer. Afterwards people sit together on the grass. Most of the women are wearing headscarves. One says she is religious and regularly goes to the mosque. One man asks the imam what he was singing. "The most beautiful names of Allah," answers the woman. "The Just, the Judge, the Generous, altogether there are 99 of them." The man enquires whether she has ever heard the Lord's Prayer spoken before. "No, no idea," she says. "But we'll be learning that." The women and the man nod, and you get the impression that if you ever wanted to show someone where God lives, it is clearly here.