Berlin’s New Church of Nothing

Maybe the communist goal of secularizing East Germany was successful after all.

By Joseph D’Hippolito
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A new worship center in the former East Berlin represents the ultimate secular view of religion. It also reflects the kind of cultural future the American left envisions for the U.S.

The House of One, to be built on the foundation of a demolished church, will enable Christians, Jews and Muslims to worship under one roof. Each faith will have its own sanctuary surrounding a central hall that will serve “as a place of public encounter, much like an urban square surrounded by different...
buildings,” according to the architectural firm Kuehn Malvezzi. Contractors will lay the foundation stone in May, and construction is expected to take four years.

“East Berlin is a very secular place,” Roland Stolte, a Christian theologian involved in the project, told the Guardian. “Religious institutions have to find new language and ways to be relevant, and to make connections.” In other words, religion must conform to, not challenge, the secular ethos. The House of One’s boxy, modernist, sterile architecture expresses that idea. In trying to incorporate features from all three faiths, the building reflects none of them. In trying not to offend, it fails to inspire. If architecture, like art, reflects a civilization’s values, then the House of One represents the victory of functional utilitarianism over transcendence. Why would a devout Christian, Jew or Muslim worship in such a place when Berlin has regular churches, synagogues and mosques?

The House of One embodies the secular view of religion as secondary, if not destructive, to human identity and progress. The divinities being worshiped are not Yahweh, Jesus or Allah but diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion. The project’s organizers even sought input from those who identified with no religion.

The project’s greatest ambition appears merely to promote dialogue. While interreligious exchanges can be beneficial, a conversation with the secular risks melding with the secular.

The House of One might be the ultimate rejection of divine inspiration, a trend already widespread throughout the religious world. Art critic Maureen Mullarkey, writing from a Catholic perspective, described that trend while commenting on the Vatican’s participation in the Venice Biennale. “Of all modern substitutes for religion, art is the most esteemed,” she wrote. “It veils contemporary materialism in the language of transcendent values.”

Ms. Mullarkey believes the Holy See has fallen into that trap. The Vatican’s contribution to the Venice Biennale included work from the Czech photojournalist Josef Koudelka, who shot landscapes featuring abandoned, dilapidated factories. The Vatican used his work “to promote hostility to industrialization,” which fits Pope Francis’ environmentalist agenda.

“This is politics. It is not testimony to those matters of personal sin and redemption at the core of the Church’s reason for being,” Ms. Mullarkey continued. “Koudelka’s elegiac images convey no knowledge of the initial purpose of these sites nor any understanding of why they collapsed into disuse. We are asked to repent of them without knowing why they existed.” She concluded that “the Church was gaining a pope who would put a spiritual face on the aims of secular politics.”
Replacing transcendent values with political ones often brings despotism. Americans see that now in the left’s hypersensitive tyranny, embodied by cancel culture, and hostility toward conservative religious ethics. East Berliners saw it for 45 years under communist domination. Since religion was “the opiate of the people,” as Marx wrote, communism sought to eradicate it. In East Berlin, the communists might have succeeded.

Churches had stood at the site of the House of One since the 13th century. Locals named the site Petriplatz for the churches’ namesake, St. Peter. In 1964, Communist authorities demolished the war-ravaged building. But between 2007 and 2009, excavators discovered the ruined foundations of all the churches. At first, residents considered rebuilding the church. “But we wanted to create a new kind of sacred building that mirrors Berlin today,” Mr. Stolte said. “The initiators are acting as placeholders. This is not a club for monotheistic religions—we want others to join us.”

In reflecting Berlin today, the House of One also reflects capitulation to the postmodern zeitgeist.

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