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The alternative to backyard worship

A "House of Religions" is being built in Berne. Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and other religious groups are working together closely on this unique project.

By Reto Wissmann

Hartmut Haas has taken on a major challenge. The Moravian Church minister is in the process of building a "House of Religions" in Berne. The 63-year-old has been working on the project for ten years, and what long remained just an idea is slowly becoming reality. Various religious groups will obtain a place where they can practise their faith in the western quarter of the federal capital. The media has long been portraying the scheme as an interreligious flagship project seeking to contribute to religious harmony. Haas says there is some truth in this but it is primarily about practical benefits: immigrant groups will no longer have to hold their religious services in backyards and garages but will instead be accommodated in a prestigious building.

Muslims from the Balkans, Alevi from Turkey, Hindus from Sri Lanka and Buddhists from all over the world will use the "House of Religions" and set up their own prayer rooms. An additional chapel will be built for members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Protestants, Catholics and the small Moravian Church that has existed in Berne since 1740, and to which Hartmut Haas belongs. Jews, Sikhs and Baha'is will also be involved in joint activities and be members of the support association, but they do not require their own rooms.

The various religious groups are structured very differently. While the Buddhists who will meet at the "House of Religions" come from a variety of countries, the Muslims almost exclusively originate from the Balkans. The Islamic umbrella organisations wanted a mosque for Muslims from Europe, the Middle East and the rest of the world and withdrew from the project because this could not be achieved. "We cannot make cultural differences disappear", says Hartmut Haas. Switzerland may well like to set up an overarching organisation for all Muslims as a point of contact, but the House of Religions Association cannot take on this task, he explains.

The project is being developed on Europaplatz, a nondescript urban space with a



Impression of the building on Europaplatz in Berne that will be home to the House of Religions

grand name. The building site in the west of the city is located close to a main road, railway line and motorway flyover. The groundbreaking ceremony took place in June of this year, and 75 million Swiss francs will be invested in this major development by November 2014. The "House of Religions" itself will cost around 10 million Swiss francs. In addition to the rooms for the religious communities, the complex will also comprise a cafeteria and event rooms available to everyone. It will be surrounded by a commercial development with offices, shops and apartments. As with sports stadia, the supplementary facilities will partly finance the "spiritual" purpose of the complex. The foundation to which the House will belong in future is funded by national churches, lottery money and independent foundations.

"This journey has been hellish at times", reveals Hartmut Haas after ten years of preparatory work. He does not so much mean the discussions with the religious groups, rather the coordination with the commercial umbrella project. He remarks: "We have only succeeded thanks to the support we have received from benefactors from the business community, such as Guido Albisetti, the president of the Europaplatz Foundation, the bauart architectural studio and Halter AG from Zurich." The negotiations with the religious groups also proved challenging but he almost always found a

willingness to compromise here. The mosque, for instance, does not point exactly towards Mecca.

Haas says that the city of Berne and the national churches did not take the association seriously in the beginning. But then they gradually became more involved in the process and learned a great deal from it. The city of Berne has become more aware of the religious dimension to immigration, and interreligious dialogue now has a proper place in the churches.

However, Hartmut Haas, the director of the "House of Religions – Cultural Dialogue" association does not see everything as rosy. He arrived in Switzerland from Germany 23 years ago and has spent a lot of time working with immigrant groups. "Our project only exists because of the Swiss system of direct democracy", he says. But this is not all positive. Minorities only have their rights acknowledged in Switzerland if they can gain majority support and, for example, come together in projects such as the "House of Religions". Immigrant groups would find it very difficult to act alone, he says, as the ban on the construction of minarets showed.

RETO WISSMANN is an independent journalist living in Biel.