Chapter 8

Hagia Sophia and the Third Space: An Enquiry into the Discursive Construction of Religious Sites

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Introduction

Are Muslim believers allowed to pray in the Cathedral of Cordoba, a former mosque that was converted into a church during the *Reconquista* in the thirteenth century? The campaign by Spanish Muslims to be allowed to pray alongside Christians in the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba reached a low point when the attempts of Muslim believers to pray in the building resulted in a violent conflict in 2010 between the Muslim believers and the security guards. This conflict reveals a deeper underlying problem that has to do with the relation of an allegedly Christian Europe to its Muslim past and presence. In wider public opinion, Europe is normally referred to as the Christian Occident. This view of Europe finds its sources not only in parts of the present political discourse but also in some ecclesial statements referring to the Christian roots of Europe. Emphasizing the Christian identity of Europe, however, is only one side of the coin. The question one has to pose is: What about the presence of the multiple others who have influenced European identity as well—even if sometimes in very subtle ways? There are many examples of such others—for example, Jews and Muslims—in Europe’s past and present. This paper will focus on the case of Islam, which precisely here in Spain—the site of the 2013 ESITIS conference—is a major historical factor. If we look at the history of Europe, we will find many instances of Muslim presence in Europe. Only a few will be mentioned: the Arabs and Moors in Spain from the eighth to the fifteenth century, the so-called Fall of Constantinople (1453), which this paper will deal with, the Siege and Battle of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as present-day resentment against Islam. The historical presence of Islam in Europe is often dealt with as a matter of foreign rule and not part of proper European history and identity. Similarly, the dominant discourse, in which present-day Muslim presence in Europe is dealt with, is in a hermeneutics that considers Islam in Europe to be an intruder, a foreigner, a threat.

Is it possible to overcome this binary opposition between Europe and Islam and see Islam as a broader factor in Europe’s identity as well? And, if yes, in
what way? Theologians working in the field of interreligious dialogue and theology of religions cannot confine themselves to purely theological questions when dealing with the challenge of the perception of religious others in the present-day context. A broader perspective is called for that is able to integrate questions of how we come to perceive others, how the image we have of ourselves is related to our images of the other—in short, how identities are constructed by way of discourse and action. Here the field of postcolonial theories seems to be a fruitful inspiration for theology, and it is not by chance that the topic of religion and religious identities has been discovered as an object of postcolonial investigation in recent times (Rettenbacher 2013a; Rettenbacher 2013b). Postcolonial theorists have developed complex explanations for how the concept of identity is to be conceived of as the product of the power discourses. The well-known postcolonial thinker Homi Bhabha presented a deconstructive approach to overcoming binary oppositions between distinct identities—for example, Europe and Islam. His concept of third space makes clear that there are no fixed boundaries between identities (Bhabha 2004). In a realm of fuzzy and fluid borders the way we see ourselves is directly related to the way we see others and vice versa. The identity concepts that emerge in this in-between space of the third space are the product of identity negotiations, in which participation in power and representation is often unequally distributed. Thus, it is impossible to come up with fixed representations of the others, and we have to recognize that representations are always influenced by questions of power—the ambivalent divergence between those who have the power to speak and represent and the silenced and marginalized voices (Spivak 1988).

When these complex theoretical reflections on identity and identity constructions are substantiated in concrete examples, the fundamental insights of postcolonial theories become evident. The relationship between Europe and Islam seems to be a fruitful case in point. As already stated above, a binary opposition between Christian Europe and Islam is constructed in the wider public opinion. By casting light on the emergence of Islam in a late antique context, however, the prominent German scholar on the Qur'an, Angelika Neuwirth, draws a different picture of the relationship between Europe and Islam (Neuwirth 2010). In a deconstructive perspective, Neuwirth is very critical of the binary opposition between Europe and Islam since it does not reflect actual historical developments. In a detailed reconstruction of the genesis of the Qur'an and Islam, Neuwirth shows that the emergence of the new religion has to be seen in its wider context of late antiquity. The new Muslim community develops in a process of negotiation with existing pagan, rabbinic, and Christian traditions. These traditions are not only critically rejected, but