Three Receptions of Bosnian Identity as Reflected in Religious Architecture

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During the final decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the fate of religious buildings in Bosnia was a reflection of processes, events, and relations not only within and between religious communities and groups, but also in society as a whole. For the purposes of the thesis set out in this chapter, it is important to distinguish between religious buildings and sacred space. The essence and form of sacred spaces derive from a spiritual truth: sacred buildings are based on the science of forms, on the symbolism inherent in forms; sacred symbols manifest their archetype by virtue of a certain ontological law. Sacred architecture is symbolic. In the case of religious architecture, however, the religious function may be imposed on any form.

Prologue: Shoes versus Bosnian heresy

In the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Bosnian identity, the erection of new buildings, like the attitude toward the religious built heritage, is a dramatic and
unambiguous expression of the very essence of the contemporary history of Bosnian society. Attitudes toward sacred spaces reveal the multiple parallel processes of identification, correction, and eradication of the Bosnian “heresy” or false doctrine—a heresy that is based on expressions of the principles of religio perennis, potential ecumenism, syncretism or—quite simply—religious tolerance.

By way of a prologue to this analysis of the contemporary phenomenology of religious spaces in Bosnia, we have selected one among the many video-sharing web sites—of which You Tube is the most widespread and most popular3—that in the manner of caricature reflects the reasons for the construction of new religious buildings as part of the dismantling of the Bosnian identity, so as to illustrate their ideological impact. The story of Leyla Allison, a young naturalized American, was posted on YouTube on October 21, 2008. In a rather solemn, more than a little tearful voice, she described her worst suffering as an eleven-year-old during the war in Bosnia, where she was living with her Bosnian parents: her shoes were split, so she did not want to go to school. The very day she decided to run away from home, gift-wrapped shoeboxes were delivered to the school—and one was for Leyla. The box contained a brand-new pair of white sneakers, which fit her as perfectly as the glass slipper fit Cinderella. “Who brought me this gift?” she asked the man handing out the boxes—wiping away her tears at this point in the video. “Jesus, God’s only son,” he replied, giving her a picture book about Jesus. “And today, proudly, I can say that it’s because of Lord Jesus and that shoebox that I’m a Christian, and I go [sic] to heaven,” says Leyla, explaining how she was “saved” from the horrors of Bosnia: by which—we conclude from her story—she means not the sniper fire, the hunger, the cold or the loss of her home, but that she was of the wrong faith. Between 1993 and 2008, the organization where Leyla works sent 61 million gift-wrapped shoeboxes around the world, including to children in Bosnia, where boxes were still arriving 16 years after the war, with the evangelistic missionary message that salvation lies in Christianity.4

It matters little to this chapter whether Leyla was really a recipient of humanitarian aid from one of the many who reached out to the Bosnian identity and who used this aid as a scalpel to dismember Bosnian complexity, or was merely an actress in an advertising campaign by a Christian missionary organization. With this little tale, which seemed touching to the Americans who added their comments, but sarcastic to Bosnians, who, regardless of their age were mocked, starved, persecuted,