

Religiosity versus Secularism in Hagia Sophia

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Abstract: - Hagia Sophia at Istanbul, Turkey uniquely a Byzantine Church built in 537 AD functioned as an Orthodox Cathedral and Roman Cathedral for 900 years till 1453 AD. In 1453, during the invasion of Ottomans, the original place of Constantinople (now Istanbul) fell into the hands of Muslims and Hagia Sophia was converted into a Mosque till 1931 for about 500 years. From 1935 to 2020, the Republic of Turkey transformed this monument to a secular museum, crossing the boundaries of religion and culture and uniting the world for a better humanity.

The amazing historical architecture of Hagia Sophia is a monument of unique legacy with universal values of cultural and artistic heritage interacting between Europe and Asia, crossing borders of religion and uniting humanity; this remarkable piece of architecture has changed its functional status of a museum to mosque this July 2020. In this era of universality and secularism, it is important that architecture should cross boundaries of religion and unite as a secular world. But the Turkish authorities have changed its status to a mosque with no regards to its originality and symbolizes the rise of religious chauvinism in the country; this unique monument of Hagia Sophia built originally as Christian Byzantine church, later altered to an Imperial mosque, renewed its function as a museum is now reverted to a mosque.

Index Terms— Byzantine, restoration, transformation, pendentives

INTRODUCTION

Hagia Sophia, was adorned the credit of the world's largest Cathedral for over 1000 years from 537-1520 AD; its huge Byzantine dome was deemed the architype of Byzantine architecture supported on the innovative structural system of pendentives. It was constructed by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I through the Greek architects Isodore and Anthemius of Tralles and was the third Church of the Holy Wisdom. The church was dedicated to the Wisdom of God, the Logos, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hagia Sophia, the Shrine of the Holy Wisdom of God, the focal point of the Eastern Orthodox Church contained huge collection of mosaic paintings and holy artefacts including a 15m silver iconostasis decorated with icons and painting.



Figure 1: Aerial view of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

In 1453, Constantinople was overpowered by the Ottoman Turkish Sultan Mehmed II; this Christian cathedral of Hagia Sophia captivated the attention of the ruler that he transformed into a mosque. The bells, altar, iconostasis, sacrificial vessels, relics and mosaics illustrating Jesus, his mother Mary, Christian saints and angels were over plastered; while the Islamic architectural features of mihrab, minbar and minarets were inserted and served as a mosque for 500 years. Many other mosques were built including the Sehzade Mosque, the Suleymaniye Mosque and Blue Mosque in Turkey inspired by this beautiful Byzantine Cathedral of Hagia Sophia.

In 1935, the founder of the Republic of Turkey and the first Turkish President, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk converted the building into a museum to highlight its universal value and to amplify secularism over religiosity. Besides this architectural piece was undergoing severe damages due the frequency of earthquakes and fire hazards; and there were no sufficient funds to preserve this magnificent architecture.

This museum monument invited the UN and UNESCO World Heritage Organization and the World Monuments Fund generously funded its restoration and preservation. After complete restoration by the World Monuments Fund, Hagia Sophia became the world's renowned museum in Turkey and more than 4 million visitors visited the country every year to visit this Turkish museum which became

renowned for its cross cultural significance unifying the Eastern world to the West, fusing the religions of Islam and Christianity in one impressive monument.

But on the 10th of July 2020, a court resolution was passed by the Turkish Presidential government that Hagia Sophia must be reverted to a mosque, which created a rift between the two religions of Muslims and Christians and disintegrated the unity of Western and Eastern world. Turkey, the so called secular country has uplifted the Islamic dominance in the nation.

ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER

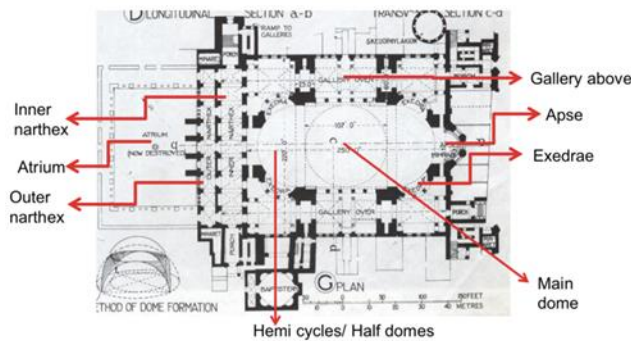


Figure 2: Plan of Hagia Sophia showing the various spaces

Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, the greatest surviving examples of Byzantine architecture is an amalgamation of complex exterior forms with vast interior spaces and volumes that reflected the intricacy of details, textures and materials. The entrance atrium space similar to Basilican spaces in the Western churches leads to the double narthex in the north west extending through the main Imperial gate to the vast interior. The central nave has a main dome at its centre somewhat elliptical varying between 31.24 and 30.86 m, flanked by two semidomes on the northwest and south east and terminating at the apse to the south east end together had clear internal dimension of 76.2 m and a height of 55.6 m

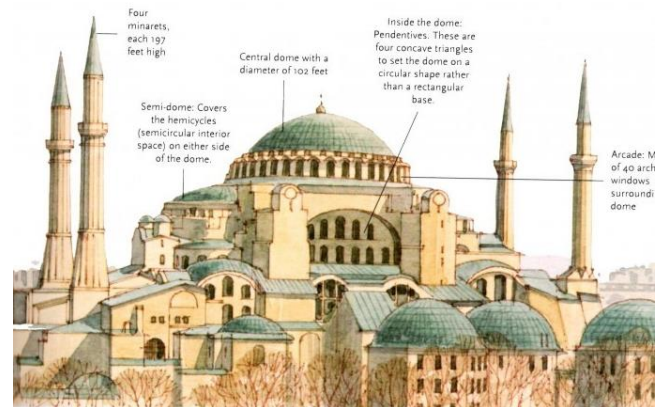


Figure 3: South Eastern View of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

above the floor level. The arched openings extending to half domes on all four sides and semi domes gives an enhanced character to the interior space. The aisle on either side of the nave has two level which served as galleries at the upper level. The upper Gallery is laid out in a horseshoe shape that enclosed the nave until the apse. The light that reflects in the interior through the arched openings is dramatic illuminating the interior spaces sheathed with polychrome marbles, green and white with purple porphyry and gold mosaics gives richness to the interior.

The impressive exterior with a myriad of grey central dome and many semi-domes at different levels flanked by four soaring minarets with red stucco walls broken with intermediate vertical buttressed structure adds a novel flavor to the historical architecture. The south west minaret was built of red brick, while the other three was built of white limestone and sandstone. The play of ring of arched openings at the central dome and at different levels of the exterior adds to the exterior beauty.

TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE AGES

Hagia Sophia underwent a series of changes and transformations because of its structural inadequacy and encountering series of earthquakes and environmental challenges.

Church (537-1453)

A sequence of earthquakes in 553, 557 and 558 AD have developed cracks in domes and semi-domes and disintegrated them completely. Consequently, the dome was restored using lighter materials and raised the dome for 6.25m, giving the building the existing inside height of 55.6m. The dome was

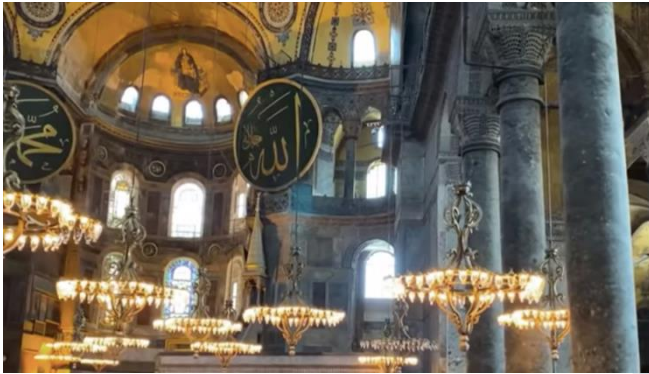


Figure 4: Interior View of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

reconstructed as a ribbed dome with 40 ribs and supported on pendentives spanning a diameter of 33.5m approximately. Another earthquake in 989 AD collapsed the interior arches too. At this time, renovation of interior ornamentalations was done, adding the massive cupids at the four pendentives. Portrayal of Jesus Christ was painted on the dome, adding illustrations of Mother Mary holding Jesus, prophets and teachers of the churches were also rendered.

Mosque (1453-1931)

Constantinople was conquered by the Ottomans in 1453 AD. The church of Hagia Sophia was looted of all its rich artefacts by the Ottoman ruler Mehmood II and converted it into a mosque by erecting a minaret at the southwest corner of the building and the mihrab located in the apse of the church originally oriented towards Mecca. Around the middle of the 16th century, two diagonally opposite minarets were built at the north east and south west corners of the building. Structural supports were added to the exterior later as the walls were getting weaker.



Figure 5: Prayer time at Hagia Sophia



Figure 6: Section of Hagia Sophia showing the structure and the form of the main dome and semi domes

In 1526, Suleiman the Magnificent succeeded the Ottoman kingship and powerful rule in Istanbul, followed by erections of mausoleums of the ruler and his family around the building. In 1739, Sultan Mahmud restored the building adding a Madrasa, a Quranic school which was used as the library of the museum; a soup kitchen for the distribution of the poor was added and a library. In 1740, a fountain used for ritual ablutions transformed it into a social complex. A new Sultan's lodge and a new mihrab were built inside.

Between 1847-50, Sultan Abdulmecid did a large-scale restoration, consolidated the domes and vaults, renewed mihrab and minbar, straightened the columns and revised the embellishments in the outside and inside. The mosaics were exposed and cleaned for protection against further damage. From the columns were hung huge circular disks or medallions, inscribed with names of Allah, Mohammed, the first four caliphs. Another Sultan's lodge was constructed in Neo Byzantine style connecting the Royal Pavilion to the mosque; introducing the timekeeper's building and a new Madrasah. The minarets were repaired and altered to be of equal height. The mosque reopened and functioned till 1935.



Figure 7: The interior domes and arches of Hagia Sophia showing the arched openings and the lighting

Museum (1935-2020)

In 1935, the first Turkish President and founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was reformist towards Westernization, Modernization and Secularism. He transformed the Hagia Sophia mosque into a museum in an effort to secularize the country and response to the treaty that was established between Greece and Turkey.

The conversion to a museum was initiated with minor changes: the carpets were removed revealing the marble floor decorations, the white plaster that covered the mosaics was also taken off; but this architectural structure was in a deteriorated state, needing a lot of funds for restoration and preservation. The copper roof of the building cracked allowing water to leak over the frescoes and mosaics. Moisture entered from rising ground water level and humidity within the monument thus creating an unstable environment for stones and paints. The United Nations and UNESCO World Heritage Organization generously funded this Museum Monument and uplifted the religious and cultural significance enhancing the architectural character.



Figure 8: The painting of cherubs on the pendentives of the Christian Orthodox Church

From 1997-2002, the dome was restored, and the roof was stabilized structurally and repaired. In 2006, the dome's interior was preserved, and the mosaic was conserved. It became the second most visited museum in Turkey inviting about 4 million visitors every year.

In 2006, the Turkish government tried to revoke the religiosity into this museum by the allocation of a small room in the museum complex allowing it to be used as a prayer room for Christian and Muslim museum staff. In 2013, the muezzin from the minarets of the museum call for prayer. Thus, there was this popular secularism in Turkey that allowed the two religions of Islam and Christianity to live in harmony with each other. Hagia Sophia was a universal monument, a true symbol of religious and cultural co-existence well-funded by UNESCO.

Mosque (2020)

Now in July 2020, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reverted the secular Museum Monument of Hagia Sophia to a Mosque, thus creating controversies on religious relationships between Islam and Christianity, international relationships between other countries of Greece, Russia, France and USA. This conversion to a mosque after 85 years has uprooted the rise of religious chauvinism in Turkey thereby attacking the heritage of secularism and humanity of the world.

While Hagia Sophia is a symbol for millions of Christians in the world, this conversion to a mosque creates a rift between the extremists of Christians and Muslims. It is a clash of civilizations and we cannot live in peace with each other.



Figure 9: The interior of Hagia Sophia showing the rich mosaics of the Byzantine architecture

What is the need to upset this world peace especially during this time of pandemic and economic crisis? The architecture that served as a bridge of peace between religions has created pain in the hearts of Christians in Turkey and in the world. The Head of Eastern Orthodox Church Patriarch Bartholomew opposed Hagia Sophia's conversion to a Mosque.

The Turkish President who is politically narrow minded, failed to consult and discuss this conversion back into Mosque with UNESCO World Heritage Organization who has been funding millions of dollars for conservation and preservation every year; thereby creating a disagreement with the United Nations which may lead to loss of funds for the mosque and will eventually lead to the deterioration of Hagia Sophia.; the universal value of this heritage site will be lost and the quality of architecture will be damaged.



Figure 10: A model of Hagia Sophia showing the clear form and additions made in different era.

The conversion of a worship place into a museum is welcomed by all, while the conversion of museum to a worship place arouses many arguments and disputes. Its retention as a museum highlights it as a secular monument with universal legacy that transcends religion with unique cultural and artistic values to unite humanity. Let Hagia Sophia, Jewel of the Byzantine unite the world beyond religion and culture.

CONCLUSION

Hagia Sophia originally built as a Christian Orthodox church with its spectacular Byzantine architectural character of domes, semi domes and exedrae, served as a church for 1000 years and then transformed to a mosque by the Ottomans, adding minarets and mausoleums adjacent to the complex and then renovated to a museum by the revolutionary modernist President of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

This secular museum transcended religion and brought a sense of unity and harmony in Turkey and the entire world. It set an example as to how architecture can preach virtuosity and humanity while stripping off the egoity of religions.

UNESCO World Heritage Organization had invested millions of dollars in its restoration and preservation and the beauty and magnificence that is seen in Hagia Sophia today was solely their effort and the Republic of Turkey ought to owe their appreciation and credit to these International Organizations.

But the saddest part is that the current Turkish President Erdogan changed the museum to a mosque without prior consultations and dialogues with UNESCO authorities. This decision seemed to be because of his political narrow mindedness stand or his greed for popularism amongst the Muslim population of Turkey.

This decision has raised criticisms from various countries of Greece, Russia, France and United States. While UNESCO has warned Turkey for its decisions before discussing with them. This raises the question of Hagia Sophia's maintenance and funding issues in the future. The glory of Hagia Sophia must not be lost.

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