Hagia Sophia: A Symbol of Christian Europe, or of Muslim Turkey?

On November 24, 1934, Mustafa Kemal was renamed Ataturk, “The Father of the Turks.” On that very same day, the Turkish Council of Ministers declared the secularization of arguably one of the most important mosques in Turkey, the Hagia Sophia. Presiding over an impressive history, Hagia Sophia was a crowning symbol of Christendom under the Byzantine Empire. Under the Ottoman Empire, however, it became a symbol of Islamic victory over Christianity. The museumification of Hagia Sophia in 1934 by the new Turkish Republic was a deliberate political maneuver to demonstrate the new, secular agenda of Ataturk’s regime by stripping one of the most important religious symbols in history of its religious purpose. This move transcended mere separation of church and state; the state was, in fact, imposing a secular agenda upon the church. Converted into a secular monument specifically to avoid conflict between the two religions - Christianity and Islam - that had laid claim to the building over the centuries, Hagia Sophia is still a symbol of religious controversy, increasing politicization, and is quickly becoming a site of dual religious appropriation.

When Constantinople fell in 1453, the Ottomans set to transform the Christian kingdom into an Islamic one through aesthetic re-identification. As a decorative feature of mosques, minarets serve a practical function for making the call to prayer and other announcements. For the Ottomans, moreover, a minaret a powerful physical symbol of Islamic victory; it was the external proof of an architectural conversion from Christian to Islam. It is not surprising, therefore, for studies to conclude that the first minaret\(^1\) was erected at the Hagia Sophia, the most

\(^1\) See Figure 1.
celebrated church of the Byzantine empire. Rather than destroy the cultural relic, Mehmet II re-appropriated the prestige and symbolic power of the Hagia Sophia for his own political purposes.

Although external modifications are additions to the original structure, internal modifications are substitutions to the original aesthetic. Because Islam itself is a reaction against the idea of worshipping any person or symbol or figure, Christian mosaics were plastered over in an effort to rid the mosque of figure, icon, image and statue. Interestingly, the transformations that the Christian church underwent demonstrate ideological shifts in Islamic aesthetic over the centuries of Ottoman rule. During the time of Mehmet II, only the images on the qibla side were seen as conflicting, but by the mid-17th century, almost all mosaics and figural images were either altered or whitewashed. They were replaced with calligraphy, decorative letters, surface coverings, and hand-woven carpets, not “objects of adoration or devotion,… [but] an aid, a help to comprehending the beauty and incomparability of Allah and Allah’s word.” A niche (a mihbar) was created for the imam to lead the congregation replete with a mihrab and a lavish flight of stairs. When the transformation was complete, so was the Islamization of the city, and “it was declared Istanbul’s first royal mosque, and in 1517, it also came to serve as the seat of the caliphate… since the church was the site of imperial ceremonies, the conversion was not only a religious act but also a military and political statement.” Most importantly, the conversion asserted the superiority of the Islamic faith; after all, what better way to make this victory physically tangible than by imposing the aesthetics of one religion upon the other?

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3 See Figure 2.
5 See Figure 3.
7 See Figure 2.
8 Agoston, Gabor, and Masters, Bruce Alan. 245.
Faced with rising threats from the West, the late 18th century saw Ottoman Sultans beginning to introduce Westernizing reforms, including the Fossati Restoration. Their work, from 1847-1849, served to reveal some of the mosaics and preserve the overall structure. The fight for and against modernization and secularization has been going on in the Turkish state and society ever since. 19th century reformers sought to reconcile the two aims, but upon the collapse of the Ottoman empire, Ataturk rejected the dual compatibility and pushed secularization to its extreme. It is no surprise, therefore, that like Mehmet II, the first endeavors towards aesthetic secularization were to be enacted on the Hagia Sophia.

Such measures involved the museumification of the site and the continuation of the efforts of the Fossati Restoration. As a symbol of modernization highlighting a secular agenda, “the mosque’s desanctification epitomized the attempt to distance the new Turkish Republic from its Ottoman past… for the first time in its entire history, the building was turned into an artifact of the past… a site of memory instead of continuing as a symbol of lived religious experience.” Some of its surviving mosaics were restored by the Byzantine Institution and restorations continue to this day; a seraphim that has been hidden for 160 years was recently uncovered after 16 years of scaffolding. The donation box, once a form of voluntary alms, is now a mandated entrance fee of 20TL collected not in the spirit of charity, but in the spirit of capitalism. The minaret is now a symbol used by secular and non-secular alike, as “during Turkey’s national struggle for existence in the period immediately following World War One, one of the supreme mobilizing symbols was that of the Turkish flag as the guarantor of the call

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10 Agoston, Gabor, and Masters, Bruce Alan. 245.
11 See Figure 4
the prayer, the ezan,” and becomes integrated into the national anthem, “reflect[ing] this conjoining of patriotism, minaret, and call to prayer.”13 No longer aesthetic evidence for the victory of the Islamic religion, it is now integrated into the propaganda of the secular regime itself.

Secularism, as commonly understood, constitutes the destruction of all traces of religious influence. Ataturk and his followers, however, have pursued “secularization” by undermining the Ottoman influences and reviving the Christian elements of the monument, as Nelson notes of contemporary tours, “Seldom is the long Ottoman history of the building mentioned.”14 In rejecting Islamism as a means of achieving modernity, Ataturk conflates Westernization with secularization, “a problem created by the Westernized elite to impose their version of modernity on a mass of population reluctant to abandon their cultural orientation.”15 In order to appease the West, the longstanding humiliation that Turkey has suffered in the past century has been well documented, particularly with regards to Turkey’s ambitions to enter the European Union. The courtship of the West includes not only the active repression of Islam, but the restoration of a Christian past; there is little wonder, then, at cause of the Islamist backlash.

Following the end of World War II, new parties were permitted to challenge the hitherto exclusive rule of Ataturk’s Republican People’s Party. In the pursuit of a popular ideology and in hopes of winning the votes of religious conservatives, some parties adopted a less stringent enforcement of secularism, or even an openly favorable attitude towards Islam. The retreat from extreme secularism was marked by the victory of the Democratic Party in 1950, and with

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13 Ozdemir, Adil, and Frank, Kenneth. 186.
temporary exceptions, secularism has since been on the decline ever since. Chief among the debates is the reinstitution of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque.

In July 1980, Prime Minister Suleyman Demiral’s government decided to acquiesce to conservative demands and set aside the part of Hagia Sophia known as the Imperial Gallery as an Islamic sanctuary. In a conspicuous reversal of Ataturk’s ban on Muslim prayers within the structure, Demiral reopened the small back annex separated by an iron grill door from the cavernous main basilica. The Imperial Gallery, which was once reserved exclusively for the Empress and her court, was decorated with mosaics during the Byzantine rule, unique in their depiction of the relationship of the religious functions of the imperial court, “underscor[ing] imperial activities such as the dispensing of alms.”  

During the reign of the Ottoman Turks, when the Church was converted to a mosque, most of these mosaics in the Upper Imperial Gallery were plastered over with paint; this particular annex was reduced to just “three tiny rooms with paint flaking off the walls onto garish carpets of green, yellow, and red,” “the green walls are peeling, the rugs are threadbare and the frescoes urgently need restoration.”  

Of all the areas in the Hagia Sophia, this annex is most badly in need of restoration, and yet Muslim worshipers swarm in by the hundreds. Never mind that the annex is so hidden from the public that only those who are looking for it would know of its existence, Muslim worshippers revel in the idea that a part of their “sacred” past once again belongs to them.  

18 I could not find a picture of the Imperial Gallery anywhere. I apologize for this.
20 Ibid.
21 Jenkins, Loren. A23.
creation and manipulation of the aesthetic environment were imperative to serve the purposes of state dogma (Christianity, Islam, and secularization), Hagia Sophia has become so politicized that aesthetic reformation is no longer needed to convey a symbolic purpose.

The reopening, moreover, is far more significant as a move of political manipulation. Even a member of its own Demiral’s own party derided the maneuver as a transparent political move, as “the party’s Deputy Secretary General, Sevket Kazan, accused the Government of using Aya Sofia in a political maneuver to win Salvation Party votes.” The very nature of a democratic system demands that aspiring leaders accommodate the public will so far as it allows them to achieve a majority, and the Salvation Party, garnering 10% of the public support, had effectively road-blocked the two main parties from achieving that majority approval. In order to siphon those elusive votes, Demiral made a politically savvy decision to assuage to conciliate the religious extremists. But to the Turkish Muslims, the reopening is, first and foremost, an affirmation of Islamic resurgence, as one stated, “This is only a small step… We will not rest till we have the whole Haghia Sophia to say our prayers in. An arm should not be separated from its body. It is only our divisions that have kept us from taking over again. When we unite we will again triumph.” The concession that Demiral made did not pacify the extremists’ views so much as to encourage their radical ambitions.

A series of right-leaning parties succeeded one another, and in January 1989, Correct Way Party deputy Ertekin Durutürk, known to be a very close to Demirel, proposed a bill in the Turkish National Assembly, asking for the Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia) to be reopened as a mosque and for the Koran to be read around the clock in the Holy Relics section of Topkapi Palace. In the five years between 1989 and 1994, the extreme-right block increased its votes from 13.90%

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22 Ibid.
23 Jenkins, Loren. A23.
to 28.66%, confirming the rise of Islam Fundamentalism, and in particular, the restoration of Aya Sofya as an iconic representative of their goals. The AKP, otherwise known as the Justice and Development Party, has Islamic roots and has been in power since 2002, confirming the conservative trend in Turkish politics.\textsuperscript{25}

As the Muslim opposition grows, seemingly ceaselessly, Christian claims remain formidable. From time to time, articles calling for the return of the Christian icon appear in opinion columns across the world, and one notable example happened in 1986, where Peter Tapke, from the Washington College called to “restore Hagia Sofia for the millennium.”\textsuperscript{26} Recently, the Turkish government has revealed ambivalence towards holding Christian services within the Hagia Sophia, going so far as to suggest that the Hagia Sophia might be opened to church service, just as it was opened for Muslim prayer. After all, since churches elsewhere in the state have been reopened, Ali Bardakoglu, the head of the Religious Affairs Directorate said in August 2010, “Turkey will not become a Christian country by allowing three to five churches to hold religious ceremonies [within the Hagia Sofia].”\textsuperscript{27} In November of this year, the pope made an unprecedented visit to the site, sparking a torrent of protests ignited by the fear that he would request the re-appropriation of the Christian landmark.

Christian, Islamic, neither, or both? The question remains to be answered, but it is now clear that Atatürk’s ambitions for a completely secular state have proven to be unrealistic. For all his aesthetic reforms within the Hagia Sophia, his concessions to Christian heritage did not secularize so much as provoke hope on both sides. Ironically, it was the

Westernization/democratization of the state that compromised its ability to be completely secularized. After all, as demonstrated by the Byzantine and Ottoman empires, only an authoritarian system can impose a homogenous philosophy amongst a diverse people (and not entirely successfully, I might add). The emergence of multi-party democracy at the end of Atatürk’s authoritarian regime permanently weakened the secular state. The religious/secular debate is the primary cause of modern partisanship in Turkish politics, and within their rhetoric, right-leaning parties use the hope of the restoration of the mosque as a symbol of religious nationalism. Secular leaders use the “Westernization” of the monument, as well as other aspects of society, to court the European Union and the rest of the world. Today, Christian and Muslim claims on the monument remain a constant fixation of international debate. Can conflicting religions reconcile their differences within a secular structure? Not only is this ongoing struggle a metaphor for the religious diversity of the country itself, but it is also a reflection of modern society as a whole.
Fig 1.

B. Hagia Sophia: View from Southwest.
Drawn in 1574 by an Anonymous Artist (from Freshfield).

Fig 2.

Fig 3.
Fig. 4