

78. REFLECTIONS ON RANDOM THEMES

HAGIA SOPHIA & ITS SIGNIFICANCE TODAY



The meeting point of two worlds, the ornament of Turkish homeland, the treasure of Turkish history, the city cherished by the Turkish nation, has its place in the hearts of all citizens.
- Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

One of the finest examples of religion-inspired architecture is the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The history of this magnificent structure is interesting and relevant today. At one time Persian imperialism took over Anatolia (Asia Minor). Then it was the Macedonian Alexander's turn to invade and take over the peninsula. The ancient Greek city of Byzantium was founded there by Greek settlers in the fifth century BCE. When the Roman Emperor Constantine I was ruling the place it changed its name to Constantinople in 330.

A grand church was constructed there during the reign of Justinian I. It took five years, from 532 to 537 to complete it. The church was destroyed and rebuilt a couple of times. In its final form it was called *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom). It was one of the largest and one of the most beautiful cathedrals in the world for a thousand years.

During the theological warfare within Christendom, Pope Louis IX dispatched his emissary in 1054 who excommunicated the Patriarch of that Church. In an eye-for-an-eye gesture the Patriarch excommunicated the emissary. This resulted in the *Great Schism*. For the next 400 years Byzantium functioned as the capital of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Christianity was in a deep division. Rome and Venice were engaged in an on-going war with the Ottomans who had an extraordinarily brilliant general by the name of Mehmed II. In April 1453, Islamic Ottoman fighters, under the command of Sultan Mehmed II, busted into Constantinople like a powerful tornado. With canons and gunpowder the army fought for more than a month and took over the city completely. As reward for the valiant soldiers the sultan give his soldiers three full days to plunder and pillage, murder and rape, after which they had to stop. According to one report some 30,000 civilians were made slaves and deported. For this accomplishment, the Ottomans bestowed upon Mehmed II the title *The Conqueror* (Alfatih). In recent PC renditions of this episode we are only reminded that this young hero allowed the smaller Greek Orthodox Church to stay.

Some years later, Pope Pius II wooed Mehmed, saying if only he embraced Christianity he would be proclaimed as the Emperor of Greece and the East.” Mehmed ignored the offer.

The two major consequences of the fall of Constantinople were: First, the city’s name was changed to Istanbul. Second, Hagia Sophia was converted to a mosque. This was not the first transformation of this kind, nor indeed the last. In 1194 Muhammad Ghorī had raided and destroyed temples in Varanasi in India. In 1526, less than a century after the Hagia Sophia episode the invader Babur, founder of Mogul rule in India, ordered a general to destroy the Hindu temple of Rama in Ayodhya and replace it with a mosque named after him. In those days there were no reactions to these with slogans like Christian Lives Matter and Hindu Lives Matter. We had to wait for centuries before such awakenings.

Be that as it may, the taking over of Byzantium was a major turning point in European history. It spelled out the end of the 1500 year-old Roman Empire and Christian dominance in a major part of Eurasia. Pope Pius II was inclined to initiate another Crusade, but the powerful German king Nicholas de Cusa opted for a peaceful talk with the Ottomans.

In the twentieth century, Kemal Atatürk who founded the modern Republic of Turkey, re-opened it as a museum in 1935. Since then that architectural marvel been visited by millions of tourists who admired its art treasures which include huge marble pillars, columns with Greek Cross and porphyry, soffits frieze with lambs, and much more.

Earlier this month (July 2020) Turkey, under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, decided to re-convert Hagia Sophia to a mosque. This reversal to their authentic values was a proud moment for the Islamic world. Though condemned in diplomatic language by most civilized countries, it was unsurprisingly applauded by all theocratic Islamic countries. In one nation they sacrificed a camel to celebrate, in perfect harmony with their medieval framework.

The 20th century saw decolonization of countries in Asia and Africa, emancipation from dictatorship of many peoples, end of legal racism, gender equality, sophisticated technologies and space exploration. However, from the perspective of enlightened people the first two decades of the 21st century have taken backward steps. Billions see regress to religious divisions and xenophobic nationalism as valid expressions of ethnic pride and patriotism. They far outnumber adherents to liberal democracy. This does not bode well.

The religions of humanity have immensely enriched us in many ways. At the spiritual level they have opened our eyes to a transcendent reality that makes life so much more meaningful. At the ethical level they have guided us in many positive ways, especially in our interactions with others. At the ascetic level they have taught us self-discipline and fasting. At the celebratory level they have fostered feasts and festivals where communities get together and rejoice in their sacred history. In addition to all this, religions have inspired some of the most beautiful music and poetry, art and architecture in the world.

That is why idealists all over the world, even while recognizing the appeal to the raw passions of tribalism, hope that the march forward to humanism and tolerant religious frameworks will resume sooner or later, and that the forces that are trying to resurrect the mindset of theocratic and ideological nationalism will eventually die away.

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