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Hagia Sophia as Mosque or Museum: Religion in a Post-Secular World

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

Turkey's decision to reinstate Hagia Sophia as a mosque, while relating to internal Turkish political dynamics, is symptomatic of a wider dispute between conceptions of religion and secularism.



Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia), Istanbul. Creative Commons

COMMENTARY

HAGIA SOPHIA, once Christendom's greatest church, then a mosque under the Ottomans, before becoming a museum in the 20th century, is now back as a mosque. Also known as Ayasofya, the iconic building has long been a symbol of Istanbul. On

10 July 2020, it had its museum status revoked by Turkey's highest legal authorities and was restored to its former stature as a mosque by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, capping years of public pressure.

While this significant ruling surfaced on the back of Turkey's internal political dynamics, it underlies the fundamental tension between religion and secularism. The ruling to revive the mosque's former status also underscores the persistence of religion in what scholars refer to as the post-secular world.

Historical Legacy

In 324 CE, the Roman emperor Constantine founded his new capital Constantinople on the site of ancient Byzantium. Constantine had made an alliance with one branch of the Christian church (today's Catholic and Orthodox denominations) to help consolidate power.

While Constantinople was not at first a Christian city – it contained shrines to many deities including Constantine's patron Apollo – it later became one. The Church of Holy Wisdom (originally 360, rebuilt 537), was for a long time the largest and most splendid church in the world. Still, today, it is hard for visitors not to be overawed by the spectacular vista as they enter through its great inner doors.

In 1453, the Ottoman Dynasty, after many years of siege, finally took the city, and one of the first acts of the conqueror Mehmed II was to pray in Hagia Sophia, effectively establishing it as a mosque. Today, many Muslims reinterpret this as a fulfilment of one of the Prophet Muhammad's hadith, widely accepted traditionally as an end time (apocalyptic) prophecy, concerning the fall of Constantinople to Muslim hands.

Secular Turn

The new secularist leader Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, who took power following the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, turned Hagia Sophia into a museum, opening it in 1935. A site of contestation between Orthodox Christians, for whom Hagia Sophia was still regarded as their main church, and Muslims, it was felt that a secular identity would resolve the issue. White plaster that had covered many mosaics was removed, while the carpets for prayer were lifted to show the impressive marble floor.

Many Orthodox Christians have long wanted Hagia Sophia restored as a church, while many Muslims have wanted it restored as a mosque. Current opinion polls across Turkey show over 70 per cent support for the restoration as a mosque. While guards had long sought to stop anyone praying inside (particularly performing *salat*, the Islamic prayer), under President Erdogan recitations of the Qur'an have happened, and in 2016 a prayer was held inside.

Greece, in particular, has long protested against these actions as this change will be a body blow for Orthodox Christians. Hagia Sophia is listed as a World Heritage Site, and UNESCO argued, given the site's historical importance and contestation, that Turkey should to listen to international opinion.

The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the Russia Orthodox Patriarchate have also stepped in. In response, Turkey insisted that it is entirely a matter of its own internal affairs. Subsequent pressure after the decision from the international community, and Turkish opposition parties, is now unlikely to sway matters.

The Post-Secular

Stretching back to the 19th century, secularisation has long been accepted as the norm. That is to say, there has been a widespread expectation that religion will gradually lose ground in the public sphere and become less relevant.

However, from the late 20th century, it has become increasingly clear that religion is not disappearing. Indeed, one of the mid-20th century's great theorists of secularisation, Professor Peter Berger, stated at the close of the century: "the world is as furiously religious as ever."

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was a first indication of such a change on the global stage, again 9/11 brought religion very clearly into the public eye, while President Trump's cultivation of the religious right, electorally influential since at least Ronald Reagan's time, has shown how religious rhetoric and constituencies can be politically significant. Religion, which arguably never actually went away, is now front and centre in world politics.

The noted German political theorist and philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, has been amongst those who have spoken of our current world as "post-secular." This term refers to the way that religion persists within the secular world. Or, for some, may indicate a new stage that comes after the age of secularism.

While theorists debate whether secularism has ended, or indeed what is entailed by it, certainly we live in a world in which religious commitments, ideologies, and political movements are an active, increasingly visible, part of our world.

Hagia Sophia and Post-Secularism

Given what secularism entails, it was taken for granted that the transition from church to mosque to museum was natural. Indeed, Hagia Sophia's new secular museum status would trump any religious claims as it was seen to be both natural and non-partisan. Certainly, secularism is still seen by many as a neutral ground that allows for interreligious dialogue and coexistence.

However, as we enter a realm of the post-secular, it is perhaps only natural that claims for secular sites to be replaced by religious sites will occur. For some, secularism is seen as being hostile to religion rather than neutral. As such, we will expect to see such claims. It is not simply an internal Turkish issue, but one symptomatic of a wider global trend of the reassertion of religion.

The current decision on Hagia Sophia will not, though, settle contestation on this site, while the wider context in which it exists will not go away. Religious and secular demands are not a zero-sum game, but some on both sides may wish to paint it as such.

Advocates of secularism meanwhile will need to think about how they frame their case for its neutral, even religious-friendly, credentials if they wish to win the ideological battle within a post-secular world of cultural wars.

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