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Architecture in Religion: The History of the Hagia Sophia and proposals for returning it to worship

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ARCHITECTURE IN RELIGION:

THE HISTORY OF THE HAGIA SOPHIA AND PROPOSALS FOR RETURNING IT

TO WORSHIP

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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by

Andrew Jonathan Cohen

2011

To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton
        College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Andrew Jonathan Cohen, and entitled Architecture and Religion: The History of the Hagia Sophia and Proposals for Returning it to Worship, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read the thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Date of Defense: November 10, 2011

The thesis of Andrew Jonathan Cohen is approved.

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Florida International University, 2011

</div>

DEDICATION

To Terry,

I cannot express how blessed I am.

This thesis is as much yours as it is mine.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To the members of my committee, I owe all of you a debt of gratitude. Without your knowledge, support, direction and wisdom, I could never have completed this project. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. Ana María Bidegain. It was her World Christianity course, as well as her enthusiasm for the subject, that helped inspire this thesis. To Dr. Erik Larson, I owe a special debt. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge his willingness to join my committee at the last minute. Secondly, I would like to recognize the importance of his invaluable expertise and wisdom, and the tremendous impact it has made on this project. Lastly, I would like to thank him for the many years of guidance and support he has given me. As for the third member of my committee, Dr. Christine Gudorf – I cannot express how grateful I am to you. Thank you for your willingness and commitment in chairing my thesis. It has been an honor and a privilege to work so closely with you. I find it apt that my first class with you was Saints, Witches and Cathedrals, and that my last educational experience with you ends with a thesis about the Hagia Sophia.

Lastly, none of my educational goals would ever have been reached without the love and support of my mother, my father, Jean and Terry. It is the four of you who I am the most grateful to. Especially, Terry, for whom I never would have had the courage or the strength to accomplish any of this.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

ARCHITECTURE IN RELIGION:

THE HISTORY OF THE HAGIA SOPHIA AND PROPOSALS FOR RETURNING IT

TO WORSHIP

by

Andrew Jonathan Cohen

Florida International University, 2011

Miami, Florida

Professor Christine Gudorf, Major Professor

For nearly fifteen hundred years, the Hagia Sophia has been a constant figure in Istanbul, Turkey. The building has been the symbol of Christianity for the Byzantine Empire, Islam for the Ottoman Empire and Secularism for Republic of Turkey. It is rare that one building has had the ability to symbolize both religion and politics in the manner in which the Hagia Sophia has. One of the goals of this research is to examine the historical circumstances that have allowed this symbolism to occur. The other goal of this research is to examine the current voice that wishes to return the Hagia Sophia back to a place of worship. To properly understand this voice, it will require scrutinizing the obstacles necessary for religious groups to overcome to achieve this, as well as determining if this is even a viable option.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

For one thousand four hundred and seventy-four years, the Hagia Sophia has stood high

above the hills in Istanbul, Turkey. In his book, *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950,* author Robert

S. Nelson gives an insightful synopsis of the life of the Hagia Sophia. In the introduction

of his book he writes:

> Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom, presides majestically atop a
> plateau that commands the straits separating Europe and Asia. Often
> simply called the Great Church in the Middle Ages, it is located near the
> acropolis of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium and at the political and
> ceremonial center of Byzantine Constantinople and Ottoman Istanbul.
> Hagia Sophia has had a complex history. Completed as the Cathedral of
> Constantinople by Emperor Justinian in 537, converted into the Mosque of
> Aya Sofya by Sultan Mehmet in 1453, decreed a museum in 1934 at the
> instigation of Mustafa Kemal, the president of the Republic of Turkey, it
> has been used, abused, damaged, restored, denigrated, celebrated, and
> enjoyed.[1]

This thesis is an attempt to explore the history of Hagia Sophia and how this history

influences a recent proposal that would bring the building back to its religious roots.

Context of the Discussion

Over the past few years, a new discussion has begun between Christians and Muslims in

the Republic of Turkey and abroad. Some members from both communities wish to see

the Hagia Sophia returned to a place of worship. However, the Hagia Sophia has always

been more than solely a place of worship. It has continuously been a vital component in

the representation of political power, as well as religious power, in the region. The Hagia

Sophia has been the primary church to the Emperors of the Byzantine Empire, a mosque

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[1] Robert S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2004), xv.

for the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire and a government-owned museum for Turkey's secular government. Through the centuries, the Hagia Sophia has at times exerted a tremendous stylistic influence on the construction of other churches and mosques in the region. Throughout its fifteen hundred year history, the Hagia Sophia has remained a symbolic illustration for both the religion and politics of Istanbul.

It is these past functions of the Hagia Sophia that complicate the idea of reverting the building from its present status as a government-owned museum to a place of worship, in whatever form this might eventually entail. Modern discussions about the potential for change can themselves only happen because Turkey is a secular Republic and not an Islamic theocracy. The Turkish government's long-standing attitude regarding religion and state is one of the primary issues this discussion needs to address if any way to move the discussion forward is to be found.

First Objective: The Hagia Sophia In Context Of The Historic Relationship Between Religion And Empire

The first objective of this thesis is to examine why the Hagia Sophia was built and how its existence has been used to first symbolize Christianity in the Byzantine Empire, then Islam in the Ottoman Empire and lastly, secularization in the Republic of Turkey. To fully understand the impact of the Hagia Sophia on the architecture, politics and religion in the region, it is important to examine the historical timeframes that each of these empires encompasses.

The first relevant timeframe for this thesis begins with Emperor Constantine I (324-337). During his reign the center of the former Roman Empire was shifted from Rome in the

West to Constantinople in the East, the capital of the new Byzantine Empire. I will discuss Constantine's rise to power, his conversion to Christianity, his establishment of Constantinople as the new capital and his building of churches as an important component in the development of the city and Christianity throughout the empire.

The discussion of this initial timeframe ends with rule of Emperor Justinian (527-565) who is responsible for building the final version, the one still standing today, of the Hagia Sophia. Between the time of Constantine and Justinian, the Hagia Sophia was destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed again. It is this last version of the building on which my thesis will focus. Justinian not only rebuilt the Hagia Sophia and expanded its size and glory, but also built an institution that demonstrated the power of his empire and its devotion to Christianity. To achieve this, Justinian made the Hagia Sophia the center point of religious and political celebration. It is this ongoing interrelationship between religion and politics that this thesis will examine in order to further gain a comprehensive understanding of the symbolic nature of the Hagia Sophia.

The second relevant period for this thesis begins with Sultan Mehmet II (1451-1481) of the Ottoman Empire and his conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The capture and subsequent Islamization of Constantinople marked the end of the Byzantine Empire. With Constantinople as the new capital of the expanded Ottoman Empire, many changes occurred. The most significant change was that Islam was now the official religion of the empire. Even though Mehmet allowed Christianity to remain in the Ottoman Empire, he took away the Patriarchal home of Orthodox Christianity – the Hagia Sophia – by converting it into a mosque. The religious transformation of the Hagia Sophia

symbolized the demotion of Christianity and the elevation of Islam in the former Byzantine Empire. The shift in religious affiliation caused many alterations to both the interior and exterior of the building, altering the Hagia Sophia's iconographic appearance. The details of these changes will be discussed in chapter three of this thesis, which will demonstrate the differences in iconography between Christianity and Islam.

The third and final historical timeframe begins with the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the establishment in 1922 of the secular nation-state of Turkey. Here again the purpose and symbolism of the Hagia Sophia was transformed by a change in the role of religion in the region. It was during this time that the Hagia Sophia had its third incarnation, that of a museum, which opened on February 1, 1935.

Second Objective: Potential Obstacles to the Discussion

The second objective of this thesis is to explore the historical origins of potential obstacles facing Christians and Muslims in their ability to share the Hagia Sophia. This will include scrutinizing the notion that, for these two religions to accomplish their present objectives, it will be necessary to separate the religious uses of the building from the political ones. This will include understanding the differences in art and architecture between the two religions, the uneasy civil context of religion in modern Turkey and how all of this combined will ultimately effect the ability of the Hagia Sophia to be returned to a functional place of worship without instigating further conflict.

Christianity and Islam are both known for their use of symbolism in art and architecture. Even though each of these religions has different design styles, symbolism has become an

inseparable component in both church and mosque construction. After examining the role of religion and politics in the context of the shifting significance of the city of Constantinople/Istanbul during the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, it will then become important to understand the role of this symbolism in the formation of contemporaneous representations of these two religions as they relate to Turkey's secular government.

Though art makes a major contribution to the decorative interior of churches, it is the silhouette of the exteriors that has become the best-known symbols of the religion. The most famous example is the Basilica Papale di San Petro, more commonly known as Saint Peter's Basilica in Vatican City (Rome). Two other churches that illustrate this are: The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and, of course, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Each of the aforementioned churches has made a significant impact on the development and history of Christianity, as well as inspired the construction of other churches.

Of these three, it is the historical heritage of the Hagia Sophia that sets it apart from the other two. The Emperor Constantine I may have been responsible for both conceiving the Hagia Sophia and commissioning The Church of the Holy Sepulchre to demonstrate his newfound allegiance to Christianity, but the Hagia Sophia did not remain a church. The transformation of such a paradigmatic building from a church, then into a mosque, then into a museum is what lays the groundwork for contemporary discussion.

In the books, *Islamic Art and Architecture* by Robert Hillenbrand and *Islamic Sacred Architecture: A Stylistic History* by José Pereira, the authors contend that, in Islam, the continuity of design in mosques is symbolic of the religion.[2] The authors feel that mosques are typically recognized for two common external characteristics in Ottoman Islamic architecture – domes and minarets. In the Ottoman Empire, these features have become the architectural emblems of Islam and part of the symbolism of the religion. The most common interior characteristics of mosques are: an open prayer space, the mihrab, and the absence of figurative art. Other elements that often exemplify a mosque, such as size, building materials, interior and exterior decorations, vary by culture and country. It was the symbolism behind the Hagia Sophia's transformation from a church to a mosque that helped signify the transformation of the Christian city of Constantinople into the Islamic city of Istanbul. The symbolic role that the Hagia Sophia played in proclaiming the change in both religion and empire is part of what has attributed to the building's longevity and significance.

Third Objective: Contemporary Significance and Future Potential

Even today, the power of the Hagia Sophia continues to excite the popular imagination. Over the past few years, there have been conflicting discussions about returning the Hagia Sophia back to its religious roots. The movement to change use of the Hagia Sophia has presented several problems. The main problem is determining which institutional entity, religious or otherwise, has the right to own the building and exercise

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[2] Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1999); Jose Pereira, *Islamic Sacred Architecture: A Stylistic History* (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1994).

control over its use. Current thought centers around establishing a dialogue to discuss the possibility of both religions sharing use of the building. The idea of sharing can be seen as a final progression of the history of Christianity and Islam in this city. As Christianity and Islam have had a tumultuous past, the potential for dialogue inspires hope that a compromise regarding shared use of the Hagia Sophia might constitute an important step towards easing tensions between the two religions. However, to achieve this step I believe it will first be necessary to move past the political symbolism that has characterized the building throughout its history. Any change in symbolism of the Hagia Sophia will need to be done judiciously, especially considering the Turkish government's historic stance regarding the relationship between religion and state.

Significance of Discussion

A tremendous amount of research has been done on the Hagia Sophia. Books such as Lord Patrick Balfour Kinross's *Hagia Sophia,* Heinz Kahler's *Hagia Sophia: With a Chapter on the Mosaics,* Robert Mark and Ahmet S. Cakmak's *Hagia Sophia: From the Age of Justinian to the Present* and Robert S. Nelson's *Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950: Holy Wisdom Modern Monument* all discuss the architectural, art and political history of the building.[3] Other authors and their works, such as Timothy Gregory's *A History of Byzantium,* Susan Wise Bauer's *The History of the Medieval World: From the Conversion of Constantine to the First Crusades*, John Julius Norwich's *A Short History*

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[3] Heinz Kahler, *Hagia Sophia: With a Chapter on the Mosaics by Cyril Mango,* Translated by Ellen Childs, Edited by C.A. Mango, (New York: Frederick A. Paeger, 1967); Baron Patrick Balfour Kinross, *Hagia Sophia* (New York: Newsweek, Inc. Book Division, 1972); Robert Mark and Ahmet S. Cakmak, *Hagia Sophia: From the Age of Justinian to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

of Byzantium and Roger Crowley's *1453: The Holy War for Constantinople and the Clash of Islam and the West* give in-depth historical accounts of the political and religious events which were embedded in the life of the Hagia Sophia.[4]

Despite the vast literature describing the significance of the Hagia Sophia, little has been written regarding the rarity of one building becoming such a symbolic representation for both Christianity and Islam. Although this fact has been acknowledged, there has not been an in-depth discussion as to its significance. This gap in information is what this thesis intends to address.

Part of what makes my topic of particular consequence is the modern secularized nation in which the Hagia Sophia is located. While the government of Turkey espouses a tolerance for other religions, such political positions do not always reflect the views of all members of the majority Muslim population. As a very small minority, the Christian community has been seeking to strengthen its own voice in political discussion. This recent interest in the proposition reflects a hope among some that joint use of the Hagia Sophia might serve as a middle ground for Christianity and Islam, and thus the symbolic importance of the building has once again has been brought to the forefront. This issue will be further explored in Chapter VII of this thesis.

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[4] Susan Wise Bauer, *The History of the Medieval World: From the Conversion of Constantine to the First Crusades* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2010); Roger Crowley, 1453:The Holy War for Constantinople and Clash of Islam and the West (New York: Hyperion, 2005); Timothy E. Gregory, *A History of Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

Chapter II: The Byzantine Empire and Early Christianity: A Survey of Religion and Politics from Constantine I to Justinian and the building of the Hagia Sophia

> The Byzantine Empire, from its foundation by Constantine the Great on Monday, 11 May 330, to its conquest by the Ottoman Sultan Mehemet II on Tuesday, 29 May 1453, lasted for a total of 1,123 years and 18 days.[5]

As with any empire that has spanned over a thousand years, examining its history can sometimes be a daunting task. This fact is especially true when it comes to the history of the Byzantine Empire. The Empire's history is often characterized by a mixture of momentous political events combined with an enormity of unprecedented theological debates. As Christianity developed as a religion, different opinions formed regarding its dogma. These differences continued to plague the Church throughout its history, often times resulting in schisms within the Church.

Over time, it became the responsibility of the Emperors of the Byzantine Empire, whether by choice or by force, to lend a hand and to assist in the mediation of these disputes. This was the beginnings of the marriage between religion and politics that this chapter will address. The information to be examined will be concentrated on theological issues that arose during the time of Constantine, how they affected his reign and how they continued to affect future Emperors. The purpose here is to discuss how this marriage of religion and politics resulted in a need for a focalized symbolic representation in order to help unify the Church and to demonstrate that the titular head of the empire was in control.

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[5] Norwich, xxvii.

For the Byzantine Empire, the Hagia Sophia became the symbolic representation of both temporal and spiritual authority. The history of the Hagia Sophia, and the meaning its architects and patrons ascribed to it, from its earliest construction to the building we see today, are founded in a history of heresy in the Church, divisions within the Byzantine and former Roman Empires, and attempts by the Emperors to use Christianity as a tool to unify the empire. This chapter will relate all of this history to the rise of the Hagia Sophia as the symbolic emblem of both Christianity in the Byzantine Empire, as well as, of the empire itself.

Constantine's Conversion to Christianity

In 299, the remnants of the Roman Empire were divided between east and west. Each half of the empire was ruled by both an Augustus (first in charge) and a Caesar (second in charge). In the east, Diocletian was Augustus and Galerius was Caesar. In the west, Maximian was Augustus and Constantius Chlorus was Caesar. The political climate in the east was initially hostile to Christianity. Four years after the split, in searching for the cause of the political turmoil:

> The oracle of Apollo at Didyma was consulted. The god, or at least his priestess, whose ravings were interpreted by a prophet, replied that "the just on Earth" hindered him from giving true oracles. Eager exegetes in the palace expounded the god's real meaning for Diocletian, who was at last induced to act. The Festival of the Terminalia, on 23 February 303, was chosen as the day which would terminate the Christian Religion.[6]

On the day of the festival, Diocletian issued an edict of persecution. This campaign "was aimed directly at the organizational structure of the Christian church, the bishops, the

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[6] Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 21.

Scriptures and the church buildings themselves."[7] Diocletian's edict prohibited Christians from assembling and worshiping their God. It also allowed for houses containing Bibles or liturgical materials to be burned to the ground, as well as all church buildings within the empire. This time in Christian history is known as "The Great Persecution."[8]

Two years later, on May 1, 305 Diocletian and Maximian abdicated their thrones, allowing for Galerius and Constantius Chlorus to ascend to the position of Agustii. Maximinus Daia became Caesar in the east, while Severus became Caesar in the west. A year later, on July 25, 306 Augustus Constantius Chlorus died. Constantius' army proclaimed his son Constantine as the Augustus in the west. However, this required the approval of Galerius, his eastern counterpart. In the end, Galerius decided that Constantine would take the lower rank of Caesar. To choose the replacement for Constantius Chlorus, Galerius sought guidance from the two former Augustii, Dioclecian and Maximian. Together the three of them appointed their colleague Linicus. Over the next few years, there would be several upheavals within the empire over leadership that would consolidate Constantine's authority, allowing him to be the most powerful man of his time. This can be seen in the reconstitution of the old Roman Empire in the new form of the Byzantine Empire under Constantine's sole leadership.

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[7] Gregory, 52.

[8] Barnes, 22.

On April 30, 311, as Galerius was close to death, one of his final acts as Augustus was to reverse his policy of persecution against the Christians by issuing the Edict of Toleration. This edict declared an end to the persecution of the Christians and the acceptance of all religions within the empire.[9] This was a major turning point for Christianity and a precursor for an even bigger event in 312 that would completely transform the stature of the religion throughout the empire.

Constantine's conversion to Christianity is one of the best-documented events of its time. His acceptance of the religion and rejection of the old Roman gods is seen as the death of what was left of the Roman Empire and the birth of the Byzantine Empire. Although the historian Eusebius, a contemporary of Constantine, is most often accredited with the account of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, his book, *Life of Constantine*, was not the first account written about the incident. In fact, Eusebius' book was written some twenty-five years after Constantine's death in 337. This has caused some speculation that the legend surrounding the events of Constantine's conversion had been embellished in the meantime. Another contemporary historian at the time, Lactantius, wrote a treatise entitled *On the Death of Persecutors*, shortly after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.[10] This treatise is actually the earliest known account telling the tale of Constantine's conversion.

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[9] Barnes, 39; Gregory, 53-56.

[10] John Benjamin Firth, Constantine the Great: The Reorganization of the Empire and the Triumph of the Church (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 98.

In both accounts Constantine, as an ambitious and superstitious leader, was searching for a god who would bestow on him military and political success. He had observed that within paganism the support that his rivals for power were receiving from the various deities to whom they had allied themselves was inconsistent. To resolve this limitation, Constantine searched for an alternative, for a god that "transcends the universe."[11] As his goal was consistent success in battle, he sought an infallible deity to whom to give his allegiance.[12] In keeping with this goal, Constantine turned to the God of the Christians.

Here is where the two accounts begin to differ. In Lactantius' version, "Constantine was warned in a dream to have the divine sign of the cross (*caeleste signum*) inscribed on the shields of his soldiers before leading them to the attack."[13] Constantine did as his dream commanded. In Eusebius' version, as Constantine was approaching Rome, preparing for battle against its ruler Maxentius, he witnessed a cross of light in the sky with the words *hoc signo victor eris* (in this sign thou shall conquer) written underneath.[14] Constantine was not sure what to make of the apparition at first. Then Christ appeared to Constantine in a dream with the sign and instructed him to make it the emblem of his army, which he did. The sign, later known as the *labarum*, was applied to all of the soldiers' military gear. In both versions, though, when Constantine and his army went into battle with Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, he was victorious. From this moment on,

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[11] Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 80.

[12] Cameron, 80.

[13] Firth, 98.

[14] Andreas Alfoldi translated by Harold Mattingly, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan* Rome (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 16.

the cross became the permanent emblem for Constantine, his troops and the Byzantine Empire.[15]

Over time, historians have debated as to the exact moment Constantine actually converted to Christianity. Some of their differences in opinion are a result of divergent interpretations as to the meaning of the term "conversion." For some, the question is whether Constantine became a Christian after the battle on the Milvian Bridge, when he first saw the vision in the sky or whether he just favored the Church from that moment on. The one thing most do agree upon is that on his deathbed in 337, Constantine was baptized and died a fully converted Christian. The relevance of this disagreement for my thesis has solely to do with understanding if Constantine's motivation was for reasons of faith or for political gains or for both. I believe that events during the remainder of Constantine's rule would demonstrate his allegiance to both his vision of a united empire and to Christianity.

The Byzantine Empire and Problems in the Early Church

Constantine's conversion, or at least his favoritism toward Christianity, did not immediately merge religion and politics within his empire. This union occurred only when Constantine encountered certain obstacles in establishing Christianity as the preferred religion of the empire. These obstacles were the heresies associated with Donatism and Arianism.[16] Each of these heresies presented Constantine with an

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[15] Barnes, 43.

[16] Gregory, 55.

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unprecedented historical situation. Unlike his predecessors, Constantine did not seek to persecute Christians. Instead, Constantine was one of the first figures to legalize the Christianity and support the religion's growth. Many of the other difficulties Constantine encountered result from the fact that many of the theological issues surrounding the early Church had not yet been resolved. These unresolved issues created such an atmosphere of chaos within the Church, and therefore the empire, that at times imperial intervention was deemed necessary.

The definition of "heresy" itself was Constantine's first major impediment in establishing a unified Church within his empire. The Christian heretics were individuals who held religious beliefs that were inconsistent with those of the more powerful majority whose goal was to establish a reified system of orthodoxy. For this majority, "salvation was not seen simply as a matter of accepting God's plan for mankind or even of living a good life and avoiding sin" but salvation could only be attained by those individuals who accepted the "correct teachings of Christianity, however those were ultimately defined."[17] It is the latter part of this statement that gave Constantine trouble. At this point in time, the Christian community was having difficulty in building a consensus concerning basic dogma of the religion.

The controversies regarding heresy generated yet an additional dilemma within the empire. The problem was a broad understanding by the clergy of what the response to heresy should be. Christian leaders felt it was their responsibility, as well as that of the

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[17] Gregory, 56.

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greater Christian community as a whole, to maintain the correct religious beliefs and to guarantee that others held these beliefs. They believed that all non-believers would be condemned to hell.

Constantine's concern about the above-mentioned situation is largely due to the fact that he was irrevocably linked to Christianity – which was becoming more and more prevalent within his Empire and because, due to his vision in the sky, many people believed he was chosen to be Emperor by God. Not only did Constantine take on the obligation to uphold the faith and to protect the religion, but he also assumed responsibility to protect the Church as a whole and its followers from heresy and any other harm. It was this philosophy that continued to be upheld by the emperors of the Byzantine Empire after Constantine – that they were responsible for the welfare of both the empire and for Christianity.

Constantine's advisors told him that his future "political and military success [were] dependent directly on his ability to maintain the unity and the correct belief of the church".[18] Constantine's political response to the controversies surrounding heresies became the foundation for the establishment of a permanent union between Church and State in the Byzantine Empire.

The first situation related to heresy that Constantine had to contend with involved a group of individuals known as Donatists. Donatists were a group of Christians who split the

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[18] Gregory, 56.

African Church. This disagreement pre-dates the reign of Constantine, going back to the time of Diocletian. During Diocletian's rule and his persecution of Christians, many North African Christians renounced their faith and allegiance to Christianity. As policies toward Christianity changed in its favor, forgiveness of the apostates became an overwhelming issue within the African Church. The leader of the bishops who felt forgiveness of such a grievous sin, especially amongst the clergy, was inexcusable was Donatus Magnus – hence the name Donatists. What ultimately caused the schism within the African Church was a basic ideological difference of belief between two groups. The majority felt the Church had the power to forgive those individuals for their sins as long as they repented, while the Donatists felt that only individuals who had shown complete allegiance to Christianity had a right to remain part of the religion, especially as leaders.[19]

The controversy in the African Church became a problem for Constantine in 313 when he wanted to restore the property of the African Church to the rightful leadership. The difficulty lay in determining who was in charge of the African Church – the new Bishop of Carthage (the leader supported by the Pope in Rome) or Donatus (the leader of the Donatists).

In 314 a council sided with the Bishop of Carthage. The Donatists were upset with this decision and asked for a ruling from the Emperor himself. Constantine also did not rule in favor of the Donatists. Constantine's decision upset them. The end result was that Constantine was compelled to send in troops to finalize the dispute. It was also one of

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[19] Bauer, 78-79.

the first times when balancing religion and politics became difficult for Constantine. Because of the Donatists' zeal and willingness to die for their beliefs, it became impossible for Constantine to keep the two sides united, which resulted in a permanent schism in the African church. The importance of this schism is that it demonstrates the continued difficulty Constantine would have in assisting the Church in resolving internal disputes. In this case, both sides believed they were right and the other side was heretical. It was also a historically significant incident because it was the first time military force was used in the name of Christianity, directed at other Christians, but it would not be the last time in which violence within the Church would be a concern for the leadership of the Byzantine Empire.[20]

The second situation related to heresy that Constantine had to contend with was that of Arianism. Constantine was the ruler of the west, while Licinius was ruler of the east. While ruling the east, Licinius encountered a problem with the Church in Alexandria. At that time, the overall belief of the Church in Alexandria was "an allegorical and spiritual (i.e., not necessarily literal) reading of the scripture and an emphasis on the absolute power and 'otherness' of God."[21] The turmoil began when a priest by the name of Arius disagreed with these teachings and taught the belief that "although a perfect man, the Son was subordinate to the Father, his nature being human rather than divine."[22] A

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[20] Kinross, 24.

[21] Lars Brownsworth, Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire That Rescued Western Civilization (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), 17.

[22] Norwich, 8.

theological debate erupted in regards to the true meaning of the trinity. Arius believed that Christ was not fully divine, while Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, felt otherwise. This disagreement caught the attention of Licinius, a pagan, who then decided this would be a good time to continue with the persecution of Christians.[23]

The above-mentioned disagreement became Constantine's problem when his military defeated Licinius in 324, finally allowing him to consolidate the empire under his sole religious and political leadership. Here again, a religious dispute seemed to have no resolution, causing Constantine to call the first ecumenical council in Nicaea on May 20, 325.[24] The Council of Nicaea was the first time the entire body of Bishops was called collectively to discuss and settle a theological dispute. In previous circumstances, councils had only been called locally. By calling an empire-wide meeting of the Bishops, Constantine demonstrated his belief in resolving the dogmatic issues plaguing the early Church – all in the hopes of keeping the Church united.

As a result of the ecumenical council at Nicaea, the Nicene Creed was created. The Nicene Creed described God and Christ as: *homoousious* meaning "of one substance." The summary statement made by the council stated that Christ was "begotten, not made, from the same substance as the Father."[25] There were some problems with this agreement right from the start. To begin with, some of the bishops did not like the use of the word

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[23] Gregory, 58.

[24] Brownsworth, 19.

[25] Gregory, 58.

homoousious because this word had never appeared in the Greek original of the New Testament. Secondly, the debate demonstrated that the church was struggling with the process of exegesis. The dispute in Alexandria demonstrated that among local Christian Churches there was no consensus on "the Faith of the Early Fathers, of apostolic times."[26] The acceptance of the summary statement did not signal agreement on the underlying issues.

The end result of the council could be considered an impasse between the two parties involved. This impasse "raised the disturbing question[s] of how God ultimately allowed heresy to exist and even flourish: [and] if the Arians were wrong, why did God not destroy them?"[27] Constantine and future Emperors were unable to help the Church answer these questions. This particularly disturbed Constantine because he "saw himself as God's instrument, entrusted with the mission of spreading the faith and creating a homogeneous, Christian, and centrally ruled empire – one God, one Christ, 'one empire on earth, set right.'"[28]

The Founding of Constantinople

One of the greatest achievements of Constantine was the establishment of the city of Constantinople. As with many great rulers in ancient history, Constantine wished to name a city after himself. As part of this desire, Constantine considered such options as

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[26] Bauer, 88.

[27] Gregory, 59.

[28] Richard Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983), 41.

the re-founding of one of the many cities located within his empire. In the end, Constantine felt that the city of Byzantium was a highly strategic location. He believed this because the city is surrounded on three sides by water and has approximately seven major hills – making it easily defended against invasion. Byzantium was also considered to be the city that bridged the gap between the eastern and western world, Europe and Asia, thus allowing Constantine to be centrally located, both religiously and politically, within his empire.[29]

As part of Constantine's goal in establishing his new city, many building projects were generated. As much as Constantine loved his church in Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, he felt "the Christians of [his] New Rome, his city of God and Emperor, needed a leader, and the church's leader needed a cathedral."[30] The term cathedral is derived from the word *cathedra* – the original name of the seat occupied by a Bishop. Hagia Irene, or the Church of the Holy Peace, was the first cathedral build by Constantine in Constantinople. It was built upon the spot "where a temple of Aphrodite once stood."[31] Placing a Christian church on pagan space was a dramatic move by the Emperor. It was Constantine's way of demonstrating that the old pagan religion was no longer the preferred religion in the empire. However, his son Constantius II (353-361) moved the Bishop to a new church – Megale Ecclesia, also known as "the Great Church"

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[29] Krautheimer, 41- 44; Firth, 259.

[30] Thomas F. Matthews, *The Byzantine Churches of Istanbul: A Photographic Survey,* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 11.

[31] Ibid.

in 360. Megale Ecclesia was to be located atop the highest point of the city. It was designed to be the focal point when viewing the city from afar. The dramatic intention of the church's location was especially important later on in Byzantine history, when it was renamed the Hagia Sophia by Constantius II and rebuilt a few centuries later by Justinian (527-565).

The Byzantine Empire After Constantine to Justinian

Life after Constantine was neither easy nor simple for the Byzantine Empire or for Christianity. During this time period four major ecumenical councils were called: the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Council of Ephesus in 431, the second Council of Ephesus in 449 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451. All of these councils were designed to contend with the issue that began at the Council of Nicaea – an understanding of how Christ's two natures were joined.

The main question raised by the above-mentioned councils, is how humanity should view God and how the relationship between God and humanity should be explained. Two different schools of thought emerged to answer these questions: the Alexandrian School of tradition emphasized the divinity over the humanity of Christ while the Antiochene School emphasized both of Christ's natures equally.[32]

The unfortunate consequence of all of these councils is that even greater schisms in the Eastern Church occurred, which at times resulted in violence. In fact the conflicts that

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[32] Gregory, 110.

arose during the councils created such a contentious climate that it characterized much of the next two hundred years and beyond. All of these religious debates continually caused problems for the subsequent Emperors of the Byzantine Empire. Part of what contributed the continuing difficulties was the fact that on many occasions the Patriarch was exiled at the end of a council, mainly due to his stance opposing that of the members of the various councils. Since the Emperors tended to see the Patriarch as the symbol of Christian unity in the Byzantine Empire which itself represented Christianity in the world, every religious argument that disrupted this view became a problem for the emperors.

Justinian's Great Church

Often times, the name of the Hagia Sophia has been translated as Saint Sophia but this would be incorrect. In fact,

> The name actually honors an anonymous biblical text entitled 'The Wisdom of Solomon', which attempted to incorporate elements of Greek philosophy into the mystical traditions of Judaism. The text, which never made it into Jewish canon, is distinguished by its personification of the Wisdom, an interlocutor between God and man, named in Greek 'Sophia'. Thus, Hagia Sophia: Holy Wisdom.[33]

The Hagia Sophia has had three incarnations. A year after its construction, the church was damaged by fire. In 404, Emperor Arcadius made John Chrysostom the new bishop. Also in 404, the Empress Eudoxia had Chrysostom removed from the city and sent into exile – causing riots to erupt, which ultimately culminated in the destruction of the church. Eleven years later, Emperor Theodosius II dedicated a new church on the same

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[33] William Rosen, Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire, and the Birth of Europe (New York: Viking, 1997), 98.

spot. The new church was also named Hagia Sophia. It too, was burnt to the ground, during the reign of Emperor Justinian.[34]

The age of Emperor Justinian (527-565) was one of the high points of the Byzantine Empire. During Justinian's reign, he reunited the eastern and western portions of the old empire yet again, introduced codes of law and undertook large building projects to reestablish the stature of Constantinople as the capital of the Byzantine Empire. One of the purposes of these projects was to proclaim the fact that Christianity was the religion of the empire. To help demonstrate this, more than thirty churches were commissioned by Justinian, the most famous being the reconstruction of the Cathedral, the Hagia Sophia.[35] By the time Justinian was leading the empire, the role of Christianity within the political framework had been established. It was because the Church was so embedded into the politics of the empire that building a single structure to represent both religion and politics was such an imperative. It was important to have a single structure that would demonstrate the importance of his position as both the leader of the empire and the representative of the religion.

During Justinian's reign, the same theological arguments regarding the nature of the Trinity and the nature of Christ resurfaced once again. Justinian attempted to resolve many of the schisms and bring the two sides back together. It was Justinian's hope that by rebuilding the Hagia Sophia after its last destruction and making it the home for the

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[34] Kinross, 22-23.

[35] Rowland J. Mainstone, Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church (New York, Thames and Hudson, 1998), 26.

Patriarch (head Bishop) of Eastern Christianity, the building would help to substantiate the authority of the Patriarch as the person from whom all of Christendom, including the western half, could seek answers to the spiritual questions that were constantly plaguing Christianity. It also appeared that Justinian was hoping that this consolidation of religious authority would help ease the tensions that were splitting the Church into east and west, Constantinople versus Rome, Patriarch versus Pope.

The building of the church was an architectural achievement in its time. The building of the church began on February 23, 532 and was completed in "five years, ten months, and four days."[36] Construction of this speed was unheard of at that time and was even extremely rare much later in history. Historically, it takes anywhere from fifty to one hundred years to build a church the size of the Hagia Sophia. Some European cathedrals have been known to take as long as a millennium. The cost associated with building such a large structure, as well as the ability to find the materials needed for construction, is the primary reason that these projects take as long as they do. Justinian spared no expense to guarantee that his church would be built expeditiously.

Another part of what made the building of the Hagia Sophia so legendary involved the many stories associated with the project. One such story recounts that: "the building of the church was attended, it seems, by a series of miraculous manifestations" one of which was that "an angel of God appeared and taught the workmen as they were building".[37]

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[36] Kinross, 30; Rosen, 116.

[37] Kinross, 32.

Another tale, told from a period early during the construction of the church, is that one Sunday the workers left a boy at the site while they went home for dinner. While the boy was guarding the site, an angel appeared and inquired, "Why [have] the workmen not quickly finish the work of God, but have left it and gone to eat?"[38] The angel told the boy to go get the workers and he would remain and guard the church until he returned. Justinian was convinced that the boy's story was true, so he refused to let the boy return to the church, "so that the angel may guard it forever, as he promised by his oath. For if the boy returns, the angel will depart."[39] According to the legend, the Emperor, the senators and bishops all concluded that the Hagia Sophia should and would be protected by God for all eternity.

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[38] Kinross, 32-33.

[39] Kinross, 33.

CHAPTER III: THE ART DEBATE

This chapter will introduce a recurring theme that will be readdressed in Chapters IV and VII of the thesis. Along with all the theological and political debates, art too played its part in the historical controversies during the Byzantine, Ottoman and Turkish empires. The art debate is centered upon the idea as to whether figurative art in religion was or was not either permissible or acceptable. The following quote, although it appeared in the eighth century, gives a good indication of the overall ideology that was being argued, from the time of Constantine to well into the twentieth century.

> The falsely called "icon" neither has its existence in the tradition of Christ of the Apostles or the Fathers, nor is there any prayer of consecration to transpose it from the state of being common to the state of being sacred. Instead, it remains common and worthless, as the painter made it.
> -- Definition of the Iconoclast Council of 754.[40]

From the beginning, the political and religious entities competing for power within the Byzantine Empire had difficulty coming to a consensus regarding the use of figurative religious art. The discussion was as complicated as the previously mentioned theological debates. In the end, the iconophiles won. However, before that victory was achieved, the permissibility of figurative art was highly dependent on who was in charge of either the empire or the Church at any given point in time. As historian Judith Herrin notes, the basis for all aniconic viewpoints stems from the interpretation of Deuteronomy 5:7-9:

> You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall make you no carved likeness, no image of what is in the heavens above or what is on the earth below or what is in the water beneath the earth. You shall not bow to them

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[40] Judith Herrin, *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 105.

and you shall not worship them, for I am the LORD your God, a jealous god...[41]

Based on the above biblical quote, reason dictates that there should be no argument regarding the use of figurative religious art at all. However, history has proven that disagreements about this issue continuously arose anyhow. Susan Wise Bauer, in her book, *The History of the Medieval World: From the Conversion of Constantine to the First Crusade*, summarizes the debate regarding figurative art in Christianity, stating:

> Christians had long been using icons as an aid to prayer and meditation for centuries, but a counter-thread of unease with these images had been stitched into Christianity from its beginnings. In the earliest years of apostolic teaching, Christians had been distinguished from followers of the old Roman religion primarily because they refused to worship images, and for the second- and third-century theologians the use of icons veered perilously close to idolatry.

> Once the ancient Roman customs had died out, so did the risk that Christians would be drawn back into them, and the use of icons became much less fraught with danger. But a strong subset of Christian theologians continued to oppose the use of icons, not because of the danger of idolatry, but because painting an image of Christ suggested that the son of God was characterized by his human nature, not his divinity. God, Who was Spirit, could not be pictured; if Christ *could* be, didn't that imply that he was not truly God? Couldn't it be argued that an image of Christ 'separates the flesh from the Godhead' and gives it a separate existence? Arguments over the use of icons became a sub-set of the arguments over the exact nature of Christ as God-man – arguments that had been going on for centuries, despite a whole series of church councils making declarations intended to settle the matter once and for all.[42]

Along with the above statement, part of what facilitated the acceptance of figurative art into Christianity was the influence of Pope Gregory I (590-604) who felt that "paintings were 'Bibles of the illiterate' [and] encouraged a narrative art which followed the Gospel

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[41] Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 906.

[42] Bauer, 358-59

stories rather than the portrait-style devotional icon."[43] Gregory was not the only theologian who felt this way.

New interpretations of scripture and changing levels of tolerance regarding the tolerance of icons throughout the centuries contributed to ongoing turmoil within the religion. As stated earlier, various Emperors, Popes, Patriarchs, Bishops, clergy and lay people all had different beliefs as to the understanding of icons and idolatry. The argument came to a head between 711-802, during a period of *iconoclasm*. *Iconoclasm* means, "the smashing of icons."[44] The word was also used to describe the time period when aniconic attitudes became the prevailing philosophy of the empire. At the beginning of this movement, Emperor Leo III (717-741) decided that all icons were to be removed from his empire. Historians believe that his decision was influenced by the spread of Islam (also aniconic). The Muslims were becoming an issue for the Byzantines, as battles, both military and ideological, became more frequent between the two cultures.

After Leo III, the Christian theological debate continued. In 754, in preparation for the iconoclastic Hieria Council held at Chalcedon, Emperor Constantine V (741-775) issued a series of *Enquiries* regarding the questions surrounding images. Constantine V argued "that the iconophiles had failed to account for how an icon could represent a divine being such as Christ without either dividing his dual natures or limiting his person."[45] The

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[43] Herrin, 106.

[44] Charles Barber, *Encyclopedia of Religion: Iconoclasm: Iconoclasm in the Byzantine, Tradition,* Ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. Vol. 6, (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 4289.

[45] Barber, 4289-4291.

majority of Bishops in attendance at the Council agreed with Constantine V. His reign is seen as one of the most supportive of iconoclasm during Byzantine history. One of the repercussions to the decision by the Council and Constantine V, was a further gap between the view of the Papacy and that of the Council. This disparity would be important later on when in 787, Empress-Regent Irene and her son Constantine VI called a council in Nicaea that supported a belief by both the iconophiles and the Papacy that icons were an integral part of the Christian tradition – completely reversing the ideas conveyed at the Hieria Council and by Constantine V.

Over the next few decades, the empire's policy towards iconoclasm would change repeatedly. In 815, Emperor Leo V would reinstate iconoclasm. In 843, Empress-Regent Theodora ended iconoclasm for good. After a long fight, the iconophiles ultimately won. It was understood that:

> Above all the icon was defined in relational terms as a likeness of the one depicted therein. An icon was thus understood to represent the formal, nonessential aspects of the visible properties of a historical subject. Furthermore, this relational model was also applied to the question of the veneration of icons. Iconophile theologians vigorously denied that the veneration of an image could lead to any confusion between the icon and its subject.[46]

Although this seemed to finally solidify the use of figurative art within Christianity, it did not permanently end the debate. In the centuries that followed, the argument would be resurrected. Although iconoclasm would not be fully resurrected until after the fall of the

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[46] Barber, 4289-4291.

Byzantine Empire, it would remain a subject of controversy until then.[47] Controversies concerning religious figurative art appear to be one of the enduring legacies of the Hagia Sophia.

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[47] Cyril Mango, *A Short History of Byzantium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

CHAPTER IV: A CHANGE IN RELIGION AND EMPIRE I: THE END OF THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AND THE HAGIA SOPHIA BECOMES A MOSQUE

This chapter of the thesis will discuss the end of the Byzantine Empire, a process that took nearly two and a half centuries. Events of the Fourth Crusade in 1202 led to the siege and capture of Constantinople by the west and an uneasy union between the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Christianity. By the middle of the fifteenth century the symbolic power of both the Orthodox Church and the empire had been greatly diminished.

It was during this time period when the Byzantine Empire became a shell of what it once was. Forces from the newly forming Ottoman Empire were an increasingly threatening the empire from the east, while relations with the west were characterized by tensions associated with the permanent division in Christianity between Rome and the now established Orthodox Church. None of this changed the desire of political leaders to seek control of Constantinople, for it still represented both the center and the symbolic past of the Byzantine Empire, as well as a prominent gateway to Europe. Within Constantinople, even in times of political decline, the Hagia Sophia still was the ultimate representation of the politics and religion of the Byzantine Empire.

The Fourth Crusade

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, suspicion and tension between the Byzantine Emperor and Rome had grown to an all-time high. Part of what contributed to this was the belief by both the Emperor and Pope that:

> the papacy and the Byzantine Empire were both based on claims of
> universal sovereignty: each claimed to be God's sole representative on

Earth...popes such an Innocent III looked to secure the acceptance of papal sovereignty from the church of Byzantium, which was considered to be schismatic.[48]

The Church in Rome felt that it was superior to the monarch of Byzantium. Both the Pope and the Emperor felt they were the true representatives of Christianity and this meant it was their responsibility to uphold the values of the Church. Pope Innocent III's belief led to a harder push against the faltering Byzantine Empire, in the hopes of establishing that he should be the only religious leader that Christians turn to for answers, guidance and leadership. To help exert his religious authority, Innocent III decided that a Crusade was in order.

The Crusades first began in 1096 partly in response to the Byzantine Empire's request for assistance against the threat of invasion by the Muslim Turks.[49] By the time of the Fourth Crusade in 1202, the anti-Byzantine sentiment that had been developing in the west had come to a head. The capture of Constantinople was not the original intent of the Fourth Crusade, but it was the end result. Initially, the objective was to lead a Crusade to Egypt. However, this required the crusaders to travel by sea, as opposed to the more traditional route by land. Circumstances in Europe were such that the Venetians were the only group of people who had the capacity or the inclination to supply the number of ships required by the Crusaders.

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[48] Gregory, 324.

[49] Kenneth Schott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume 1 Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 409.

On their way to Egypt, the Crusaders took a detour to the Venetian city of Zara. A few years earlier, Zara had fallen under the control of the Hungarians. As the Crusaders were short of money to continue with their campaign, the Venetians negotiated a deal that would benefit them both. If the Crusaders were willing to assist them in recapturing Zara, in exchange for this help, the Venetians, as partial payment for this help, would allow the Crusaders to use their ships. In the end, the Crusaders successfully recaptured Zara. Pope Innocent III was so aggravated by this change of course and the resulting outcome that he decided to excommunicate the Crusaders.[50] It is at this point that Phillip, King of Germany (1198-1208) and Duke of Swabia stepped in and offered to finance the Crusaders, enabling them to continue their crusade. This financial agreement was all contingent upon the Crusaders allowing Alexius Angelus, his brother-in-law and son of the deposed Byzantine Emperor Isaac II Angelus (1185-1195), to join forces with them.[51]

Alexius wanted his throne in Byzantium back. To achieve this, Alexius convinced the Crusaders that if they allowed him to join, he would deliver Constantinople to Rome, handing complete authority of the Church to the Papacy. The end result of the Fourth Crusade was that Constantinople fell. It was also the beginning of the end of the Byzantine Empire. At the end of all of this, the *Partitio Romaniae* was signed and the Byzantine Empire was divided amongst its conquerors.[52] The emperor received twenty-five percent of the empire, including the majority of Constantinople. The remaining

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[50] Brownworth, 261.

[51] Herrin, 262-263; Norwich, 298-301.

[52] Gregory, 331.

three-quarters of the empire was to be split between the Venetians and the Crusaders, with the Venetians also taking three-eighths of the city of Constantinople.[53] It is during this time period that the empire is often referred to as *the Latin Empire*. The success of the Fourth Crusade diminished the influence and stature of the Patriarch, allowing the Pope to now be perceived as the unequivocal authoritative figurehead of Christianity. The weakened condition of the empire at the end of the Fourth Crusade set the stage for what would occur a few hundred years later – its final destruction at the hands of the Ottoman Empire.[54]

The Fall of Constantinople, 1453

The Muslim desire to conquer Constantinople can best be summarized by the twelfth century Arab writer, Hasan Ali Al-Harawi: "Constantinople is a city larger than its renown proclaims. May God in his grace and generosity design to make it the capital of Islam."[55] On May 29, 1453, the Muslim world would have its wish.

The events leading up to the demise of the Byzantine Empire began in 1449 when the newly crowned Emperor Constantine XI Dragases (1449-1453), one of the least powerful Emperors in Byzantine history, did not have his coronation in the Hagia Sophia. Instead, Constantine XI was crowned Emperor in a civil ceremony in Morea on January 6, 1449. His coronation was a momentous occasion because in the past, to symbolize the unity between religion and politics, is was crucial that the Emperor be crowned inside the

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[53] Gregory, 331-332; Herrin, 265.

[54] Latourette, 405, Norwich, 299-306.

[55] Crowley, xv.

Hagia Sophia. By holding the coronation there, it helped to solidify the union between religion and politics by symbolically linking the two together – the Hagia Sophia being the primary Cathedral in the empire's capital city and the home of the Patriarch.

The historical sources are unclear as to whether the newly crowned Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Mehmet II, was fully aware of the discourse that was occurring in Byzantium. It is apparent that he viewed conquering Constantinople as an important component in his aspirations in expanding Islam and his own empire. Mehmet viewed Constantinople as the city to help symbolize the dominance of Islam over Christianity and as part of that he viewed the Hagia Sophia as the ultimate prize.[56]

On April 5, 1453 Mehmet and his troops encamped outside the walls of Constantinople. The Sultan sent word to the Emperor, that it was "required by Islamic law [...] that all his subjects would be spared in return for immediate and voluntary surrender."[57] Needless to say, Emperor Constantine XI did not comply or respond. On April 6, Mehmet began his attack. Knowing that this battle was coming, the Emperor and the citizens of Constantinople had spent the previous winter reinforcing the city in preparation for this battle. Over the next seven weeks, the Byzantines would seek assistance from the Venetians. In the end, that would only delay the inevitable.

> On 22 May there was a lunar eclipse; a day or two later, as the holiest icon
> of the Virgin was being carried throughout the streets in one last appeal
> for her intercession, it slipped from its platform. A few hundred yards

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[56] Norwich, 376.

[57] Crowley, 374.

further on, a violent thunderstorm caused the whole procession to be abandoned. The next morning the city was shrouded in fog, unheard-of at the end of May; the same night the dome of St Sophia was suffused with an unearthly red glow that crept slowly up from the base to the summit and then went out...Mehmet himself was greatly disturbed, and was reassured only after his astrologers had interpreted it as a sign that the building would soon be illuminated by the Pure Faith. For the Byzantines, the meaning was clear: the Spirit of God itself had deserted their city.[58]

On the last day of the Byzantine Empire, the citizens, clergy and Emperor in Constantinople all crowded into the one place that symbolized their faith and empire – the Hagia Sophia. By the next morning, the Ottoman troops were at the door of the Great Church, killing the priest in mid-prayer at the altar. Legend has it that certain relics and artifacts were quickly gathered by the most faithful of the priests who then mysteriously vanished into the southern wall of the sanctuary, to remain there in waiting until Constantinople is once again the Christian city of its past and the Hagia Sophia the symbolic heart and soul of it.[59]

In what may seem as poignant, the Byzantine Empire began with Emperor Constantine I and ended with an Emperor who was his namesake, Constantine XI. As the Ottoman forces besieged the city, the Emperor was seen removing his royal garments atop his horse as he rode into battle. That was the last time Constantine XI was ever seen. He died in the battle along with his empire and was buried in a mass grave, along with others who fell, attempting to keep Constantinople and the empire alive.

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[58] Norwich, 376-77.

[59] Crowley, 229.

The Hagia Sophia Becomes the Ayasofya Mosque

Upon entry to the Hagia Sophia, the Ottoman victors ransacked the building. All remaining religious icons and relics were desecrated, destroyed or looted. The fifteenth century historian George Phranntzes writes in regard to this event:

> How unfathomable and incomprehensible is Thy wise judgment, O King Christ: We saw the beautiful cathedral of the Holy Wisdom, that heaven on earth, throne of the loveliest of God, seat of the Cherubim, the second citadel of Heaven, creation of the hands of God, the marvelous miracle, the pride of the whole earth, beautiful and more that beautiful – this we looked upon, as the heathens in the holy place ate and drank on the holy altar table and gave free rein to their appetites. Who would not have mourned for you, O holy temple![60]

Shortly after the ransacking had begun, the Sultan arrived and entered the Great Church. Dismayed at the desecration being perpetrated by his men, Mehmet grabbed one of the men hacking away at the marble flagstones and ordered him to stop. Mehmet then reprimanded the man: "For you the treasure and the prisoners are enough. The buildings of the city fall to me."[61] With that, the Sultan had a religious representative of Islam climb into the *ambo* and recite a Muslim prayer. The Sultan himself then climbed up to the altar and prayed to Allah. From that moment on the Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom and the Great Church was no more. It was now the Ayasofya Mosque.

> [Mehmet] was quick to recognize Hagia Sophia's imperial prestige and monumental magnificence...Shared architectural idioms and a familiarity with Hagia Sophia's imperial iconography were important factors that contributed to its preservation...His restoration of the Hagia Sophia as his royal mosque was part of an ambitious program to restore the new Ottoman capital to its former magnificence and prosperity in the golden

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[60] Kahler, 68.

[61] Zachary Karaball, Peace Be Upon You: The Story of Muslim, Christian and Jewish Coexistence (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 160.

age of the Byzantine Empire, so that it would become a proper center for the world empire he sought to create. In this unique building, past and present were juxtaposed to invite recognition of the Ottoman sultans as the successors the Byzantine emperors and of the triumph of Islam over Christianity.[62]

Mehmet realized as part of his conquest, that he was still responsible for the Christians located within his empire. As part of his effort to reassure Christians that they would be safe under his rule, Mehmet appointed a new Patriarch, Gennadius II. The previous Patriarch had fled when it was determined Constantinople would fall. Gennadius' installment ceremony was conducted in the Church of the Holy Apostles, which at least for now would replace the Ayasofya as the Patriarch's home. During the ceremony, Mehmet is quoted as saying "Be patriarch, with good fortune, and be assured of our friendship, keeping all the privileges of the patriarchs before you enjoyed."[63] With that symbolic gesture, the last Christian ties to the Ayasofya, excluding the art, had been severed.

The Muslim Legends of Ayasofya

The Ayasofya's consecration as a mosque symbolized the victory of Islam that had been dreamt of for centuries. Even early on, in both the life of the Ayasofya and of early Islam, legends pertaining to the eventual conversion of the Ayasofya into a mosque began to surface. One of the first of these legends suggests that the half-dome of the Hagia Sophia, located above the apse, collapsed on the night of Muhammad's birth and all repairs to the dome failed until the Byzantine Empire sent representatives to Muhammad asking for his

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[62] Mark, 196-197.

[63] Kinross, 102-103.

blessing to rebuild the church. Muhammad did so, only because he knew that someday the Ayasofya would become a mosque. "Thus, the new dome was held in place by the Prophet's miracle and, according to one version of the legend, by a special mortar compounded of the sand from Mecca, water from the holy well of Zemzem at the Ka'ba, and the Prophet's saliva."[64]

Muslim legends pertaining to the Ayasofya claim to go back to the time of the prophet, however unlikely that seems to be. One of these legends surrounds the story of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Ansari believed in a prediction by the Prophet that said that one day, the Ayasofya would become a mosque and any Muslim who "prayed in it would go to paradise."[65] Because of this belief, al-Ansari made an agreement with the then Byzantine Emperor that he would abandon his conquest of Constantinople in exchange for the Emperor allowing him to pray in the Great Church. The Emperor agreed and al-Ansari became the first Muslim to pray in the Ayasofya – outraging the citizens of Byzantium. As a result of their anger, the Byzantines killed al-Ansari, which according to the legend elevated him to the status of martyr. As with many legends, there are some truths hidden in their stories. One of the things that happened shortly after Mehmet conquered Constantinople was the discovery

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[64] For the story of earth, water, and saliva, Mark (200) quotes the seventeenth-century travelog of Evliya Celebi, *Seyahatname* (Istanbul, 1896), 1: 124-5; also see F.W. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* (Oxford, 1929), 1:11.

[65] For the story of Ayyub and the Arab sieges of Constantinople, see Stephane Yerasimos, *Legendes d'empire: La foundation de Constantinople et de Sainte-Sophie* (Paris, 1900), 38-48, 160-82. Yerasimo's translation is based on the edition of Friedrich Geise, *Die altosmanischen anonymen Chroniken: part 1: Text und Variantenverzeichnis* (Breslau, 1922), 71-111; M. Canard, "Les expeditions des Arabes contre Constantinople dans l'histoire et dans legende," *Journal Asiatic* 208 (1926), 61-121, as cited in Mark, 199-200.

of al-Ansari's tomb outside the city walls. It is not clear, however, whether the discovery of the tomb led to the legend, or the legend to the recognition of the tomb. Mehmet rebuilt the tomb to support the belief that Constantinople had always been destined to be ruled by the Ottomans as an Islamicized city.[66]

Legends that the Ayasofya had been consecrated by both Muhammad and a Muslim martyr helped to legitimize the building's sanctity as mosque. In the minds of many Muslims, the Ayasofya had always been destined to be nothing more than a place of worship to Allah, the true God. These legends also played an important part in the memory of the Ottoman people as to why the Ayasofya was so important. Once again, religious history and symbolism have been important elements in the establishment of the iconographic importance of this building.

Changes to the Ayasofya

These foundational myths did not mean that architectural changes were not to be made to the Ayasofya. It still looked like a church and that needed to be changed. In their book, *Islamic Architecture and Its Decoration: A.D. 800-1500,* authors Derek Hill and Oleg Grabar classify Islamic art into six main categories: human and animal (rare), architectural, geometric, writing, vegetal and abstract. The reason for classifying Islamic art into these six categories is to help facilitate a comprehensive perspective of Islamic religious art. Although they consider figurative art to be the most rare, especially in Sunni Islam, it too has played a controversial part within Islam, though not as divisive as within

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[66] Mark, 200.

Christianity. There is evidence that at various times throughout Islamic history tolerance for iconic imagery has come and gone. This will be demonstrated by the inconsistencies in the covering of Christian art by various sultans over the next few centuries.

One of the first things that Mehmet did to visually change the architectural appearance of the Ayasofya was to place a wooden minaret in the southeast corner of the building's exterior. It was the first minaret to be built in the city and a symbol of Istanbul's conquest and rebirth. Mehmet later replaced the wooden minaret with a polygonal brick one. The second minaret to be built was done by Sultan Selim II (1566-1574) on the northwest corner of the building. The remaining two minarets, which complete the framing appearance of the structure, were started during Selim's reign but finished during that of his successor, Murad III (1574-1595). The minarets were an important change to the outward appearance of the Ayasofya. Since the building so dominates the skyline of the city, it was essential to amend a quintessential component in mosque building to the structure, to guarantee that there be no confusion as to what religion this building was now associated with.

One of the other more noticeable changes to Ayasofya did not occur instantaneously. The mosaics of the Ayasofya are one the building's longest lasting legacies from its Christian past. The mosaics were preserved in part as a reminder of the building's Christian and Byzantine past. The involvement of a number of Sultans in decisions about the art in the Ayasofya over the next centuries demonstrates the continuation of the building at the intersection of religion and politics. In 1609, the Sultan Ahmed I made some of the most significant changes to the mosaics of the Ayasofya. Ahmed was

considered a much more devout Muslim than his predecessors and therefore took a much more hard-line stance on the aniconic tradition of Islam than the Sultans before him had. However, Ahmed was not consistent in his reforms. Most of the mosaics were plastered over, but it seems that the mosaics in certain parts of the building remained uncovered well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Ahmed, some select mosaics could remain provided they adhered to what at the time was deemed acceptable in Islam. The most notable example being that in the main prayer space, Ahmed spared "the four seraphim on the *pendentives* and the Virgin and Child in the *conch* of the apse above the *mirhrab* flanked by the archangels Gabriel and Michael and framed by the figures on the great eastern arch."[67] However, it was documented in 1611 that a veil had been placed over the mosaic of the Virgin and Child that would allow the mosaic to still be seen from the gallery above, but obscure it from the view of worshippers in the prayer space.

In contrast, the "Pantokrator image" located in the dome of the Ayasofya, which represented Christ as God, was definitely unacceptable. It was one of the main mosaics that Ahmed was responsible for covering. To replace the Pantokrator, a roundel was put in its place. Subsequently, an inscription of the Quranic verse referred to as the Light Verse (24:35) was added.

> [The Light Verse] refers to Allah as the light of the heavens and the earth, an appropriate substitution for the Pantokrator image with a calligraphic representation of the non-anthropomorphic Muslim God [...] Moreover, the Light Verse echoes the Greek inscription 'Peace be with you; I am the light of the world,' which remained visible up to the mid-eighteenth century on the mosaic lunette panel above the imperial door representing

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[67] Mark, 218.

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Christ enthroned, the very door from which the dome was meant to be viewed upon entrance to the sanctuary. This suggests that the choice of inscriptions was guided by an understanding of the iconography of the mosaics that they replaced or complemented[68]

The covering of the majority of Christian art was completed during the reign of Mahmud I (1730-1754). However, covering the art did not end the debate concerning it.

In 1849, Sultan Abdulmecid (1839-1861), as part of the latest renovations being done on the Ayasofya, decided that the mosaics that had been previously covered by his predecessors should be uncovered and repaired. The sudden change in direction regarding the visibility of the Christian art was problematic for Abdulmecid. By this time in Ottoman history, aniconic preference in Islam was at one of its strongest points. As a compromise between what he wanted and what was perceived to be the desire of the majority of the public, Abdulmecid requested that when the mosaics were repaired they be covered in such a manner that they could be uncovered again, sometime in the future, during a more religiously tolerant time.[69] A more tolerant time did eventually come in 1922, when Istanbul was no longer a part of the Ottoman Empire but part of the newly founded Republic of Turkey, and the Hagia Sophia became a museum. The re-uncovering of the mosaics will be discussed further in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

However, it was during the renovations of 1849, that eight enormous roundels by the calligrapher Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi were installed. These roundels have become picturesque representations of Islam within the Ayasofya, These prominent roundels are

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[68] Mark, 219.

[69] Ibid.

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are 7.5 meters in diameter and are inscribed with the names of Allah, Muhammad, his grandsons Hasan and Husayn, and the first four Sunni Caliphs; Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. They replaced smaller ones, bearing identical inscriptions installed in the previous century; the replacements are considered the largest calligraphic panes in all of Islam. Although the older ones have been perceived by some as more aesthetically fitting with the inner dynamics of the mosque, the new larger roundels give the impression of attempting to demonstrate the dominance of Islam within the building.[70]

Several additional buildings were also added to the grounds of the Ayasofya including a *madrasa* and a library. The Emperors Mehmet II, Selim II and Murad III all built tombs for themselves and their families adjacent to the main structure of the Ayasofya. Inside the main building, the former baptistery was converted into a tomb for Sultans Mustafa I and Ibrahim. In all, between 1573-1648, five Sultans, three Sultanas and 140 royal children were all interred at Ayasofya.[71] Lastly, in the eighteenth century Sultan Mahmud I installed a fountain of ablution to the west of the tombs. Past the fountain, several small domed buildings were added as housing for the clergy of the mosque. All of this assisted in transforming the exterior of the Ayasofya from a church to a mosque. This last section of the chapter only slightly touches upon the physical transformation of the Ayasofya from its life as a church to its life as a mosque. The purpose was to demonstrate that once claimed by the Muslims, over time, the only recognition of the building's Christian past was in written memory and in the surviving, mostly covered,

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[70] "Great Calligraphic Panes" *Hagia Sophia Museum,* accessed October 5, 2011, http://www.ayasofyamuzesi.gov.tr/en/icmekan.aspx?no=58.

[71] Kinross, 108.

Christian art. The building became distinctively Muslim – so much so, that it became the inspiration for the design of many of the mosques later built in the region. The most famous examples of this modeling of new mosques on Ayasofya are: the Sülemaniye Mosque (1558) and the Kiliçç Ali Paşa Mosque (1558). Other examples of mosques that were influenced by the design of the Ayasofya, adopting one or more features characteristic of Ayasofya are: the Mosque of Fatih (1463), Imperial Mosque of Mehmed II (1470), Mosque of Rum Mehmet Paşa (1469), Mosque of Atik Ali Paşa (1497) and the Imperial Mosque of Bayezit II (1505). The majority of these mosques are located within greater geographic vicinity of Constantinople (Istanbul).[72]

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[72] Mark, 179-182.

V. A CHANGE IN RELIGION AND EMPIRE II: THE END OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND THE HAGIA SOPHIA BECOMES A MUSEUM

The Beginnings of the Separation of Religion and Empire

As historian Justin McCarthy relates, attempts to modernize the Ottoman Empire

emanated internally relatively early, and not from colonialization:

> The Ottoman Empire was one of the first states to decide to modernize itself along Western models. Few countries outside Europe were given the chance to make that decision. They were westernized as part of the process of being conquered and ruled by Western countries. Trying to avoid that fate was what set the Ottomans on the path of reform. As might be expected, changing an entire society was not an easy task.[73]

From 1453 to 1774, the Ottoman Empire roughly maintained the same geographic

borders: from the Persian Gulf west to parts of north Africa and northwest into areas

around the Black Sea that are now part of Russia, Romania and Bosnia. But starting in

1774, Russian military aggression to extend their own empire and European colonial

expansion began to threaten the borders of the Ottoman Empire. These evolving external

threats exposed vulnerabilities within the empire and motivated a search for reformation

of the political structure.

Part of what hampered the political structure was the diversity in culture, language,

religion and economics throughout the empire. The military was holding the empire

together, but it was apparent that the military alone was not enough. The Ottomans were

acutely aware of the need to modernize all of their social institutions simultaneously in

order to keep up with their European rivals. In the late eighteenth century, Sultan Selim

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[73] Justin McCarthy, *The Ottoman People and the End of Empire* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8.

III (1789-1807) attempted to reform the empire through an amalgamation of western political ideology and Islam. Although these reforms did not work, they did plant the seeds for reform movements that would later come in the empire and ultimately have more success.

As the nineteenth century approached, reform movements in the empire became more numerous and more intense. In his book: *Islamic Imperialism: A History* author Efraim Karsh summarizes the Ottoman problematic: that reform efforts would only hasten disintegration of the empire.

> These numerous strands of hostility optimized the hopelessness of the Ottoman reformers. Theirs was a Catch-22 situation. Whatever course of action they chose, they were bound to antagonize some of their subjects. The preservation of the tottering Empire required tighter central control; the prevention of the religious, social, and economic cauldron from boiling over necessitated greater local freedoms. Even in the best of cases, such incompatible objectives are very difficult to reconcile. In non-consensual, multi-ethnic and multi-denominational empires, the chances of such reconciliations being achieved are virtually nil. All that can realistically be hoped for is a working balance between the constituent elements that will keep the empire going. In the Ottoman case, because of the stark reality of the empire's weakness, the gap between the imperial dream and the actual process of fragmentation was too wide to bridge through reform. Rather than putting the Ottoman house in order and reconciling its many differences, the reforms accelerated separatism and deepened existing schisms.[74]

Of all the reforms deemed necessary by the Ottomans, it appears that religion became the strategic tool that would help facilitate all the others. What helped to develop this ideology started in the sixteenth century when the Ottoman Empire acquired the holy sites of Medina and Mecca. Control of these holy cities reinforced the Sultans' belief that it

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[74] Efraim Karsh, *Islamic Imperialism: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), *93*.

was their responsibility to protect all of Islam. This newly adopted ideology created a crisis of authority within the empire, though, as the leadership wished to maintain and promote the Turkish language and culture which was at odds with Arabian Muslim identity. In addition, Islam was often plagued by pockets of heterodoxy disrupting the unity of the religion, especially in the more remote regions. To resolve this dilemma, bureaucrats within the empire felt it was imperative to gain control of these factions. They began by attempting to advance Sunni Islam as the only acceptable form of Islam within the empire. Leaders of the heterodox movement were dispersed to the far reaches of the empire, where they would hopefully have as little influence as possible.

Lastly, the government concentrated their efforts on building religious institutions run by the *ulema,* doctors of Islamic Law, as well as other religious elites, who would all be trained under government supervision. It was hoped that this would in turn transform these individuals into state officials and allow for centralized control over the local authorities, their livelihood and the religious education system, ultimately giving the government complete control over Islam.[75]

Between 1839 and 1863, the government instituted reforms in an attempt to codify commerce, agrarian, maritime and penal codes into a non-religion-based legal system. By the 1860s, the reforms had become known as *nizams* and a system of courts, known as *nazimi* courts, were established to address legal matters pertaining to these codes. What these courts really did was take away Islamic law as the law of the land and establish a

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[75] Findley, 92-93.

non-religious way of dealing with legal disputes, causing major change to the structure on which the empire had been established. By the 1870s, when a new constitution was created, divisions between religious and secular control would become even more apparent.[76]

An assembly that included the *ulema*, military and civilian officials, drew up a constitution in the fall of 1876. The constitution demonstrated the Ottoman government's dedication to such ideals as rule of law, guaranteed rights, and equality. The articles within the constitution "were grouped in sections pertaining to the empire's territorial integrity, the sultan and the dynasty; Ottoman subjects' rights and obligations; the ministers of state; the officials; the parliament; the courts; the provinces; and a final miscellaneous section."[77] The constitution included broad provisions that expanded and consolidated ultimate religious and governmental control into the hands of the Sultan.

All of this history lays the foundation of what was to happen to the Ottoman Empire in the beginning decades of the twentieth century – its collapse. By the end of the nineteenth century, religion and empire had already begun splitting into two separate entities within the Ottoman Empire. Even though the Sultan still maintained a tremendous amount of centralized control over both the religion and the government, many of the local government institutions and laws were no longer under religious

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[76] Findley, 94.

[77] Findley, 93.

control – leading to major confusion amongst the citizens, the politicians and the religious elite within the empire.

World War I ended with the Ottomans disgraced by their loss. The Allied victors were determined to embarrass them. As far as the Allies were concerned, the empire was to be divided, dismantled, all its power stripped away. The Ottomans realized this would result in significant changes to their religio-political structure.

Birth of the Republic of Turkey

On October 30, 1918 the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros with the Allied powers. On November 13th of that year, Allied troops took the city of Istanbul and put it under martial law. On August 10, 1920, the Treaty of Sevres was signed, dismantling the Ottoman Empire for good. All that remained was the geographic region of north-central and northwestern Anatolia, including the area of Istanbul, but it was to remain in control of the Allies. The Ottomans' were to dissolve and disarm their military institutions, all but 50,000 soldiers. Their debt and finances after the war were also to be controlled by Allied forces.[78]

One of the repercussions of World War I was loss of Ottoman identity. As the empire was divided, Ottoman identity translated into ethnic identities amongst the former members of the empire. By the end of the war, the Turks represented an ethnic majority, at least for a small amount of time. The Treaty of Sevres did not provide a complete resolution to the border disputes between the Ottomans and the Armenians. Instead this

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[78] McCarthy, 126-130.

would be left in the hands of the American President Woodrow Wilson, who proceeded to take away even more territory from the Ottomans by giving the Armenians all of northeastern Anatolia and a large percentage of eastern Anatolia. Izmir, which was populated by a large majority by Turks, was handed over to Greece. The Allied powers took ethnic identities and political history into very little account.

As a result of these early divisions, the Greeks invaded northern Anatolia, which was predominately Muslim and the Armenians invaded the east, all while the French invaded from the south. The invasions by outsiders seemed to unify the Turkish people. The Turkish War for Independence had begun. It was during this time when Mustafa Kemal, later to be known as Ataturk, was brought to the forefront of the Turkish political arena. At the end of the Turkish War for Independence, Ataturk would become the first President of the new Republic, as well as the architect of the new secular state in which the Republic was to be formed. On July 24, 1923, the Lausanne Treaty was signed, ending the War for Independence.[79]

Before the end of the war however, Ataturk had already started to gain in power and popularity. As he began to form an early government, it was decided that Ankara would be the most centrally located city within the new state. This move by the makeshift government, as well as their concerted effort to control all communications in and out of Istanbul, laid the groundwork for removing the last symbol of the Ottoman Empire, its capital. In January 1920, the National Pact (*Misak-I Milli*) was adopted to recognize the

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[79] McCarthy, 129-147; Kinross, 91.

lands occupied by Muslim Turks as an entity to be referred to as *Turkey*. On April 23 of

that same year, the assembly formed the Grand National Assembly (*Turkiye Buyuk Millet

Meclisi*). On November 1, 1922, the Grand National Assembly abolished the Sultanate.

By October of 1923, the government of Turkey had been internationally recognized as an

independent nation. On October 23, the Assembly voted and proclaimed the birth of the

Republic of Turkey. The last remnant of the Ottoman Empire was abolished on March 3,

1924, when the government ended the Caliphate.[80]

The following Friday, at the Ayasofya, the mosque that had once symbolized the

Ottoman Empire, the Sultan and his authority within Islam, there was a new call to

prayer:

> O God, grant thy protecting aid to our Republican Government and the
> Muslim nation. Make Eternal the glory of the Muslims and raise the flag
> of Islam, which rests upon the Republic of Turkey, above all other flags
> and make them live by the Spiritual Prophet.[81]

Needless to say, what the call to prayer did not accurately reflect was that, although the

new Republic was primarily Muslim in population, the association between religion and

empire was over:

> While some of the early republican reforms were more significant than
> others, together they signified a radical transformation for Turkey. A laic
> nationalist state had replaced a multiethnic Islamic polity. An all-out push
> for secular modernity had replaced Ottoman gradualism. Many reforms –
> changes in alphabets, units of measure, clothing, clocks, and calendars –
> reduced differences between Turkey and Europe, facilitating interaction
> between the two. [...] The most divisive Ottoman social differences had

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[80] Findley, 222-226.

[81] Kinross, 92.

been ones of ethnicity, not class; and the empire's collapse had converted most of the ethnic conflicts from domestic into foreign policy issues.[82]

Religion was now to be a regulated institution and it would never wield the same local powers as it had in its past. The new system for the regulation of religion in the Republic will be discussed in Chapter VI of this thesis. It is important to note, that from the moment the Republic of Turkey was created, the major ideological theme implemented by the government was to permanently change the way in which religion and government interacted – the two entities would no longer work in conjunction with one another. Instead, religion was now to be a government institution that would yield significantly less power than it ever had during either Byzantine or Ottoman history.

Secularism was one of the most significant changes to both religion and politics that the new government instituted. The move of the capital city from Istanbul to Ankara was not just to allow for the government to be centrally located within the new Republic, but it was also designed to remove the religious significance of Istanbul. This in turn would help change the role of religion within the country. The change in the capital's location also played a role in changing the significance of the Ayasofya. Along with the capital, the Ayasofya was to no longer be the symbol of religion and politics.

The Ayasofya Becomes a Museum

Ataturk well understood the symbolic importance of the Hagia Sophia. As he was implementing other secular measures in the new state of Turkey, he realized that in order

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[82] Findley, 256.

to establish the new secular ideology throughout the newly formed Republic, the past symbolism of the building must be transformed.

> A new secular future awaited Hagia Sophia, the great shrine that had successively served Christianity and Islam, God and Allah, for fourteen hundred years. Ataturk was aspiring to create, in his Turkish Republic, a fusion between the civilizations of East and West. The shrine of Hagia Sophia, which had long been a symbol of the conflict between them, was now to symbolize their union. Ataturk decided to convert the shrine into a Byzantine-Ottoman museum.[83]

There was no fanfare involved in the death of the Hagia Sophia as a religious institution. It almost seems strange how quietly the building was transformed in function, meaning and import, considering how symbolic it had been, for as long as it had been. This is not to say that as a museum the Ayasofya has not generated interest in the history of the building and the past that it represents. In fact, the powerful significance that both the interior mosaics and the exterior silhouette of the building play in the spiritual imaginings of both Christians and Muslims has not been diminished. Nevertheless, the Ayasofya was to become a monument to the past, a past that was characterized by the unity of religion and politics.

In April of 1932, the Byzantine Institute of America was given permission to begin restoration of Ayasofya. As part of the restoration the Turkish government gave the Institute permission to uncover the Christian mosaics, which had been hidden, and to actively attempt to restore them. For the first time in the building's history there would be no conflict about the content of the art, the appropriateness of it, or whether it might offend either Christians or Muslims. The art was to be displayed to celebrate both

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[83] Kinross, 123.

religions equally. In many ways, this change in attitude can be seen as a symbolic representation of the new secular policies of the Turkish government. No one religion was to be given preference over another. It seems as though there would be no better choice to celebrate the Republic's aspiration to once and for all find a balance between religion and politics than to have the Ayasofya be the representative for the new politics that was being created.

CHAPTER VI: THE NEW FACE OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN TURKEY

The Ayasofya's current incarnation as a museum has come to symbolize the Turkish government's policy regarding religion and politics. The government officially shows no preference for one religion over another, as it claims to be secular in nature. However, the government does control all religion in the country. This is done through two governmental departments: the Directorate of Religious Affairs or the *Diyanet Isleri* and the General Directorate of Foundations. The Diyanet was established in 1924 after the abolition of the caliphate to help control all aspects of Islam. Their mandate includes: regulation of education of clergy and laity, mosques, call to prayer, prayer books, holidays, public religious dress codes, etc., although much of Muslim education is jointly controlled with the Ministry of Education. Non-Muslim religions are considered part of the country's foundation system (this will be explained in further detail in the section pertaining to religion and property law) within the country and are under the purview of the General Directorate of Foundations. These two governmental organizations allow for all facets of religious life within the Republic to be controlled by the government.[84]

Secularism, Laicism and Kemalism

Although Turkey considers itself to be a secular nation, it is in fact more of a laicist society. The difference between secularism and laicism is most easily explained by the differences each of them has when it comes to the idea of religion and State. In secularism, the premise is that government has no official involvement in religion, other than to protect the right of its citizens to practice any religion of their choice and to do so

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[84] Findley, 252; Lewis, 313-314.

freely. In laicism, the government's purpose is not to separate religion from the State, but to allow the State, rather than religious authorities, to control religion. Laicism does, however, share certain characteristics that are similar to secularism – mainly the fact that the State is responsible for protecting the rights of its citizens to practice freedom of religion.[85]

In Turkey, the combination of laicism and secularism is sometimes referred to as Kemalism. Kemalism is based on the idea of national identity, combined with State control of religion, both of which were implemented by Ataturk during the beginning years of the Republic. Ataturk's intent was for Islam to be guided by the government and that only what the government deemed to be real Islam (Sunni Islam) was to be practiced. Over time, Kemalists have found themselves slowly breaking apart into two distinct groups – the Kemalists (although they are often also referred to as the secularists) and the Islamicists. The Kemalists are those individuals who wish to see a stricter separation of religion and State, while still adhering to the guiding principles established by Ataturk, while the Islamicists are the individuals who wish for Islam to be more integrated into governmental policies and laws within the Republic.[86]

This polarization within the Turkish electorate has not only been of national concern, but has also caught the attention of the international community. There is concern that Turkey is, in the minds of many secularists, slowly shifting from a secular nation to either

[85] Davison, Andrew. "Turkey, a 'Secular' State? The Challenge of Description." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2/3 (2003): 337-341.

[86] Alam, Anwar. " Islam and Post-Modernism: Locating the Rise of Islamism in Turkey." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 20, no. 3 (2009): 357-361.

an Islamic democracy, or far worse, an Islamic nation. What is meant by the last part is that there is concern that Sharia Law may replace the constitution of Turkey, over time. This fear has been heightened over the last decade with the rise of an Islamic-based political party within Turkey, known as the Justice and Development Party or AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*).[87] The rise in power and popularity of this party has had many people worried that Turkey's secular days are numbered.

Concerns about the AKP were based on the fact that much of the early rhetoric of the party was based on ideology that would take Turkey away from the Western ideals which it was embracing as it moved toward the European Union, and move it more towards the more hard-line anti-western Islamic stances taken by other Muslim nations in the Middle East. There was fear that if the AKP gained power in Turkey, it would not be long before Sharia Law would replace the secular constitutional law of the land.

Ataturk

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk is the founding father of the Republic of Turkey. Ataturk's rise to power during the Turkish War of Independence led him to become the first President of the Republic. His biggest legacy is founding the new nation under the western secularized ideals – eliminating the sultanate, the caliphate and turning the remaining religious entities within the Republic into well-organized ministries of the government. That being said, his rise to power and his long-term effect on policy and ideology in the Republic are not centrally relevant to this study. Instead, I have

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[87] Alam, 352.

decided to concentrate on the current status of his memory in the Republic because it is this legacy, which in the previous section of this chapter I referred to as Kemalism, is what is of importance in the discussions regarding returning the Ayasofya back to a place of worship.

Over the last twenty years, Ataturk's memory has evolved into a sort of legendary status within the Republic. In many ways, his memory can be compared to how Americans celebrate and view George Washington. The resurgence in popularity of Ataturk, along with an increase in the display of his imagery throughout the nation, is sometime seen as a reaction to the Islamic movements that have been gaining in power throughout the Republic. Kemalism is seen as the antithesis of the Islamic movement – hence, Ataturk is the symbolic figure of this movement. The one advantage that Kemalists have over their political Islamic counterparts is that because Ataturk is not a religious figure, displaying his image and celebrating his identity in public on a national level is not prohibited. Yet the increase in Ataturk imagery can be directly correlated to the increase in visibility of Islam in the public domain.

The importance of Ataturk can be understood instantly upon landing in the Republic of Turkey.

> Visitors to Turkey are immediately greeted with images and reminders of
> Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founding father of the country. When
> travelers land at the Ataturk Airport in Istanbul, two gigantic pictures of
> the leader welcome them. The shuttle from the airport drops travelers in
> Taksim Square, across from the Ataturk Library. When they tour the city,
> visitors pass by the Ataturk Culture Center, notice the Ataturk Monument,
> and cross the Ataturk Bridge. They encounter the numerous statues,

portraits, and sayings of the leader that encumber every available public space.[88]

It is not just images of Ataturk that are finding their way into the cultural environment of the Turkish people. Over the past twenty to twenty-five years, Islam, too, has made its way into the everyday public life. Female university students are wearing veils again – a practice that had been banned since the early days of the Republic, though policies regarding the rights of university students and other women in the country to wear the veil had fluctuated. The matter was settled in a 2008 Constitutional amendment proposed by the AKP that permanently allows women to wear the veil in public. The measure passed by a majority of seventy-five percent.

In the late 1990s, when the Islamist Welfare Party won local elections throughout the country, they implemented many visible signs of the religion. One of the first and most noticeable changes was the changing of many of the country's the road signs. They were suddenly painted the color green – the color representing Islam. The Welfare Party also planned an Islamic garden and a new mosque complex in the city of Istanbul, which for the first time in a long time, brought Istanbul back into the spotlight. It some ways, it would appear that the Welfare Party was attempting to resurrect the religious past of the city to help generate a renewed interest in the power that Islam once yielded in the cultural and political lives of the Turkish people.[89]

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[88] Ozyurek, Esra. "Miniaturizing Ataturk: Privatization of state imagery and ideology in Turkey." *American Ethnologist* Vol. 31, No. 3 (2004): 374.

[89] Ozeyurek, 377.

These are just a few examples of how Islam started to go against the Kemalist ideology that had been governing the country since Ataturk created the Republic. In response to the Islamicists, the Kemalists increased the number of images of Ataturk throughout the country – all in an attempt to quash this newfound rise of Islam as a political movement.

The AKP

Beginning in the mid 1980s, anti-secularist movements began to rise in Turkey. What is important to note here, is that anti-secularist Islamic movements have been a part of the Turkish political landscape since the beginning of the Republic. However, it was not until the 1980s that these movements were finally able to gain a hold within the political landscape and start making inroads into the government. By the mid to late 1990s, Turkey was facing political turmoil regarding the rise in power of these pro-Islamic organizations. The secularists in power were going to great lengths to find legal recourse to stop these Islamic parties from firstly, being allowed to form as legal political parties and secondly, to try and stop them from winning elections.[90]

The AKP is considered to be one of the most controversial political parties since the Republic began. The current Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, initially was perceived to be one of the most Islamicist leaders in the Republic's existence. This was largely due to the fact that before becoming Prime Minister, Erdogan was a prominent figure and advocate of the Virtue Party. The Virtue Party was closed by the Constitutional Courts in 2001 for violating the country's laws pertaining to religion and

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[90] Alam, 354-355; William Hale, "Nationalism, Democracy, and Islam in Turkey: The Unfinished Story," *The Middle East Journal* Vol. 64, No. 1 (Winter, 2010): 132.

political identity. Once the Virtue Party had been closed, its members became divided. The more conservative and less extremist members formed the AKP. However, because while a member of the Virtue Party, Erdogan's rhetoric bordered on the more extreme end of the religio-political spectrum, it was believed that once in power, Erdogan would attempt to dismantle the secularized constitution of the Republic.[91]

In the end, the majority of the fears the secularists had regarding the AKP have turned out to be false. There are two interconnected reasons why once in power the AKP toned down their Islamic rhetoric and agenda – Turkey's application to join the European Union and the fact that it turns out that the majority of people in the Republic are less concerned about religion and more concerned about social, economic and welfare policies. Understanding the dynamics required to stay in power, the AKP has walked a fine line. It has made some concessions to Islamic sensitivities, as in the constitutional amendment allowing headscarves, but has continued to respect secularization laws that are intended to keep religion in the background (examples of this military prohibitions regarding the openness of officers in pro-Islamic organizations) and changing legislation, for example, property laws regarding religious organizations, to help appease some of the concerns of the European Union courts.

Overall, it appears that the secularist concerns regarding the AKP, at least for the moment, are unjustified. In fact, over the past few years, the AKP has done more for balancing the rights of the minority religious population than many of its predecessors. However, these

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[91] Dagi, Ihsan. "Turkey's AKP in Power." *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 2008): 25-30.

changes in policies have not stopped the exodus of non-Muslims from the country, mostly because there is still a large fear that these things are only being done to appease the European Union and not because they are part of the true long-term agenda of the current government, which the AKP controls.

I know I have only briefly touched on the AKP and the controversy that surrounds them. The purpose here was to demonstrate that pro-Islamic political groups are gaining power in Turkey, yet at the same time, they are upholding the secularized laws and beliefs of the nation. The more interesting point to all of this is that no matter how secular the AKP acts, the party's opponents are determined to prove that the AKP has an ulterior motive. This can be seen over the past few years as several secular groups have brought the AKP in front of the Constitutional Court to have them disbanded. So far, the Constitutional Courts have found no violations by the AKP that would cause them to not be allowed to remain a political party.[92]

The importance of the AKP, at least at the moment, is that for the past decade they have been the political party in power and in control of the government. If the Ayasofya were to be returned to a place of worship, at least in the near future, it would be while they are in power. Therefore, having some understanding that the AKP is both secular and Islamic in its tendencies is important in trying to determine what they may or may not allow, regarding the Ayasofya becoming a religious institution once again.

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[92] Dagi, 25-30.

Religion and Property Law in Turkey

The last potential problem with returning the Ayasofya to a place of worship, either the Christian or Muslim communities, is an issue that has recently been in the Turkish courts and worldwide news. The issue concerns property laws in the Republic since 1936. In Turkey, religions were made part of organizations known as foundations. The foundations are overseen by the government as part of the governmental system to protect secularism within the Republic. Oversight of the foundations allows the government to control the power and authority of religious organizations.[93] In 1936, all foundations were put under the authority of the General Directorate of Foundations. "This law was aimed at controlling Muslim foundations that were regarded as a threat to the secular regime."[94] The law also affected non-Muslim foundations. As part of the law, all foundations were required to declare their assets (such as hospitals, orphanages, schools and cemeteries), their incomes and how they spent these incomes. It became known as the "1936 Declarations."[95]

Here is where the law becomes tricky for the 1936 Declarations. According to Turkish law, the only minorities within the country are those negotiated over in the Lausanne Treaty. The Turkish government feels that the minorities referred to in the Treaty are

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[93] Yonca Poyraz Dogan, "Turkey's Non-Muslims Praise Law to Return Properties, Awaits Implementation," *Assyrian International News Agency*, September 4, 2011, accessed October 5, 2011, http://www.aina.org/news/20110903223008.htm.

[94] Orhan Kemal Cengiz, "Minority Foundations in Turkey: An Evaluation of Their Legal Problem." Oral presentation at the Dutch Embassy in Ankara on April 4, 2003.

[95] Selonim Arsu, "Turkish Government to Return Seized Property to Religious Minorities," *New York Times*, August 28, 2011, accessed October 1, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/world/Europe/29turkey.html.

Greek and Armenian Orthodox Christians and Jews. However, the treaty only specifies that minorities are non-Muslims. The Turkish government's interpretation of the treaty has enabled the Turkish government to discount all other non-Muslim religions, except for the three groups just mentioned, which means that large numbers of non-Muslim citizens have no legal recourse against religious discrimination by the Turkish government.

The recent issue is less about minority religion in Turkey, which has been an ongoing issue in the past, pushing Christians and Jews to depart, and more about the legal standing of majority and minority foundations. Starting in 1938, the Turkish government kept amending the 1936 Declarations by continuously adding more government departments to which foundations were required to submit applications when wishing to purchase property. By the 1960s, "Governors started to decline to issue the necessary documents that the minority foundations needed in order to register new real estate."[96] In the end, the way in which the laws were interpreted, translated into minority foundations not being able to expand within the Republic.

All of these issues came to a head in a 1974 Supreme Court of Appeals ruling which,

> decided that the declarations made by the minority foundations in 1936 were in fact Charters. Therefore, unless it was clearly indicated in such a declaration that the foundation could acquire new possessions, acquisitions made after the declaration had no legal validity. Therefore thus "illegally possessed" properties would have to be returned to their former owners.[97]

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[96] Cengiz, Minority Foundations in Turkey.

[97] Cenzig, Minority Foundations in Turkey.

As a result, large amounts of real estate were being confiscated by the government, and minority foundations' ability to acquire any new real estate or keep in their possession property that was thought to be theirs was eliminated.[98] Then, in 2002, in the process of attempts to harmonize Turkish Law with that of the European Union, amendments were made in the Law of Foundations so that minority foundations were allowed to acquire real estate with the permission of the Committee of Ministers.[99] As might be expected, to date, few minority foundations have been permitted to do so.

In September 2011, another new property law was passed in Turkey. This time however, the law was designed to help harmonize with the legal provisions of the European Union, which Turkey has been anxious to join for over a decade. It stated that all property confiscated after the 1974 court decision was to be returned. This decision has been considered a large victory for the non-Muslim community in Turkey, which was, for the first time in a long time, given the equal status under the law that the law itself had required.

The property issue is extremely relevant to issues surrounding the Ayasofya. Up until a decade ago, it was completely up to the government as to what foundations could own land. Preference was given to the Muslim foundations, which in turn enabled them to expand their places to organize and pray. The restrictions imposed upon the non-Muslim minority caused a large portion of the Christian and Jewish communities to leave for countries that were not so prejudicial towards them. The whole property issue is also

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[98] Dogan, Turkey's Non-Muslims Praise Law.

[99] Cengiz, Minority Foundations in Turkey.

very contradictory considering how adamant the Turkish government is regarding its secularity and the legal equality and freedom of all religions.

The property issue is relevant to the question of the Ayasofya being returned to use as a place of worship for either the Christians or the Muslims of Istanbul because it explains why this issue has arisen now. Until the last decade, property ownership of the Ayasofya would have been impossible by religious foundations, as, of course, would government ownership of an active place of worship. The 2011 changes to the property laws now allow for either the Christian community, the Muslim community, or both, to now have the right to own the Ayasofya.

CHAPTER VII: PROPOSALS FOR RETURNING THE AYASOFYA TO A PLACE OF WORSHIP

The Ayasofya's current incarnation as a museum has come to symbolize the Turkish government's stance concerning secularism in the nation. The government officially shows no preference for one religion over another, which can sometimes be difficult in a country that is predominately Muslim.

There are still Christians left in the Republic. They represent a very small minority of the population and are gradually being displaced by the Muslim majority. The Christian voice that wishes to see the Ayasofya returned to a church is not, for the most part, originating from the Christians of Turkey. It is largely coming from Christians abroad, chiefly members of the Greek Orthodox Church in America, who wish to see the current Ecumenical Patriarch of Orthodox Christianity, Bartholomew, returned to the building that was once his home. An interesting note to all of this is that these movements are not based on any stance taken by the Patriarch.

Part of the reason the Patriarch is detached from the debate can be seen in the relationship between the Orthodox Church, the Turkish government and himself. In an article entitled *The Last Orthodox Patriarch in Turkey?* author Bill Wunner points out that under current Turkish law, all nominees for the Patriarchate must be Turkish citizens. Although the government has allowed several overseas archbishops to apply for Turkish citizenship, none of them have been approved. The lack of approval in citizenship is presenting a dilemma for the Orthodox Church, which is finding itself short of qualified individuals to replace the aging Patriarch. The issue of citizenship is extremely important because final

selection of a new Patriarch requires the approval of Turkey's government.[100] Yet at the same time, the Turkish government will neither recognize the title of Ecumenical Patriarch nor his function as an international religious leader. The best explanation for this appears to be in the way in which the government interprets its own religious laws. By recognizing the Patriarch in any official capacity, the government may fear that it is unfairly showing preference to Christians in a manner in which it does not do with other religions. This is only supposition however. The Turkish government itself does not appear to give any legitimate answer as to why it refuses to recognize the Patriarch.

This would help to explain why the Patriarch distances himself from any and all discussion regarding the return of the Ayasofya to a place of Christian worship. He is afraid that involving himself in this controversial conversation will lead to his position being eliminated by the government, which would have significant impact of Orthodox Christians worldwide. It would appear that for now, as long as the Turkish government has this kind of control over Orthodox Christianity, the Patriarch appears to be content to remain in his current home, the Patriarchal Church of Saint George.[101]

It appears however that it is the international outcry for the Ayasofya's return to a place of worship that appears to be the loudest. Organizations such as: *Free Agia Sophia Council of America, The International Hagia Sophia Coalition* and the *International Congregation of Agia Sophia*, are all examples of international Christian organizations

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[100] Bill Wunner, "The Last Patriarch in Turkey?" August 27, 2010. Available at: http//www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/Europe/08/26/wus.patriarch/index.html.

[101] Wurner, The Last Patriarch in Turkey.

whose sole purpose is to lobby the Turkish government for the right to pray in the building.

The group that has gone the farthest in this effort is the *International Parish of Hagia Sophia Association,* which has filed a lawsuit with the International Court of Human Rights. The purpose of this lawsuit is to challenge the Turkish government's legal stance that prayer is not allowed inside the Ayasofya, since it is currently a government-run museum. What all of these groups demonstrate is that the desire to return the Ayasofya to a place of worship is more of an issue for Christians abroad than in Turkey itself. Even those in Turkey who wish for the building to be reconsecrated as a mosque are relatively few.[102]

There are in Turkey attempts by politicians to grab the media spotlight by introducing laws that would enable the building to be reinstated as a mosque. The political argument has been summarized as follows:

> The arguments concerning Ayasofya and the Greek patriarchate, which have ever been on the Turkish political agenda, also reveal the conflicts between the two aspects of the discourse on "Fatih's Istanbul." The patriarchate in the nationalist and religious discourse is, on the one hand, the proud example of Islamic justice that allows it to survive in its bosom (and even a diplomatic card to play in gaining centrality for Istanbul in the Orthodox world). On the other hand, the patriarchate is seen as an instrument, a fifth column of revanchism, of a Christendom that still cannot accept the loss of Istanbul to the Muslims. In the 1994 elections, WP candidates both paid visits of respect to the patriarchate and participated in demonstrations, designed to instill fear in the same. This contradiction reflects a real schizophrenia; it cannot be simply explained through the conjunctural demands of electioneering. The discussion of

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[102] Lia Pavlou, "International Parish of Hagia Sophia Association Files Lawsuit at EU Court of Justice," *The Greek Reporter (Greece),* September 22, 2011, accessed http://greece.greekreporter.com/2011/07/21/stop-desecrating-hagia-sophia.

Hagia Sophia is even more revealing and constant. Fatih did not convert all the churches of Istanbul to mosques; he selected a few to do so, above all the cathedral of Hagia Sophia. Thus, Ayasofya became a symbol of Islam's victory over Christianity and the West; this is why political Islam never forgave Ataturk for decreeing Ayasofya a museum in 1935. This act was not a gesture of generosity akin to the pluralistic tolerance of the Ottomans; it was a capitulation to the Christian West, a reversal of Islam's victory. Hence, its reconversion to a mosque has been a constant demand and mobilizing platform of the reconquest discourse. In fact, this demand, in the form of draft legislation to be discussed in the parliament (and guaranteed to incite passions), remains in the arsenal of Islamic deputies and is brought on the agenda as it becomes tactically expedient.[103]

This "schizophrenic" approach colors all Turkish discourse on the subject, and explains why they cannot sanction the building being returned to either religion.

Setting aside the political debate over restoring the Ayasofya as a place of worship, there are still debates over the restoration of the building, and art has again been brought to the forefront. Restoration efforts since the Ayasofya has become a museum have at times pitted Christian and Muslims against each other. There have been moments in the restoration process when the restorers have needed to decide whose art plays a larger contribution to the historic preservation of the building. As the Turkish government is the entity ultimately in charge of the process, politics still play a part. In fact, in the process of researching this thesis, I discovered that although I tried to focus on the preservation of the art and how this plays a role in the motivations of all three parties involved in the discussion, I had to concede in the end that politics, both local and international, have played a larger role in the discussion of returning the building to a place of worship than any of the religious or artistic arguments.

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[103] Caglar Keydar, *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 50.

Church or Mosque?

In a December 8, 2008 article written for the Smithsonian about the Ayasofya, architectural historian Robert Ousterhout from the University of Pennsylvania, who specializes in Byzantine architecture, summarizes the current status of the building as follows:

> Hagia Sophia is a pawn in the game of intrigue between the secular and religious parties…there is an alarmist response on both sides. They always assume the worst of each other. Secularists fear that religious groups are part of a conspiracy…while religious people fear that the secularists want to take their mosques away from them...neither side is willing to negotiate...there is a visceral mistrust on both sides.[104]

What I believe this quote is effectively stating is that the current symbolism of the Ayasofya is lost in a kind of limbo. For the Christians, the Ayasofya is a church that was stolen from them by the Muslims. For the Muslims, the Ayasofya is a mosque that represents their domination both physically and spiritually over the Christians. For the Turkish government, the Ayasofya is the symbol of secularism. The real problem that Ousterhout's statement points out is that the current symbolism of the Ayasofya is not only different for each group – but that these symbols are not only in conflict, but the conflict is essentially a political one, rooted in the distant past, that is only religious on the surface. The problem lies in the fact that groups whose identities are rooted in the two different empires that Ayasofya has represented each wish to claim the property as a political symbol of those empires long past. Both groups deny the present reality. The reality that it is just not possible to resurrect the past they so greatly desire.

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[104] Fergus M. Bordewich, "A Monumental Struggle to Preserve the Hagia Sophia: In Istanbul, secularists and fundamentalists clash over restoring the nearly 1,500 year-old structure, " *The Smithsonian*, December 8, 2008.

This situation brings to light the original question – should the Ayasofya be returned to a place of worship and if so, which religion should have control of it? A valid argument can be made for both Christians and Muslims as to the religious significance of the building. For either religion to solely take possession of the building, the interior art of the building is going to play a critical role.

If the Ayasofya were to become only a Church once again, there would definitely be calls to eliminate all of the Muslim art, as well as all the distinctive Muslim architectural features, though there is no doctrinal reason that much of it must be removed. Any removal of the minarets would be visible all throughout Istanbul, which would immediately produce public outcry from Muslims. The interior art is removable, however, any attempt to do so would also create an immediate uproar. Any damage or destruction to the Muslim art incurred in the process of its removal would no doubt further incite many Muslims, who would already be agitated by the fact that the building was being given to the Christians and not them. The Muslim art has historical, religious and intrinsic value to it. Its destruction would not just be a tragic loss, but since some calligraphy art has the names of God, Muhammad, other significant figures in Islam, as well as verses from the Qur'an, the destruction of any fixtures bearing these inscriptions would undoubtedly be perceived as blasphemous by the Muslim community.

As for the removal of the minarets, this would present both a costly structural problem as well as a possibly dangerous political situation. When the minarets were installed, part of their function was to help reinforce the structure's foundation. There is also a symbolic problem with the removal of the minarets. The minarets have become an iconic

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representation of the building itself, which sits high within Istanbul, and is an orienting landmark. For many the minarets are both symbolic of the buildings past as a mosque, and a symbol of the city as a Muslim city. The government agrees that the minarets are part of the iconographic role the building plays in the city's skyline. Any attempts made by the Christians at removing the minarets would be met with resistance from both the Muslims and the government.

There is one more major impediment to the art debate. Article 24 of the Republic's constitution states:

> No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political influence, or for even partially basing the fundamental, social, economic, political, and legal order of the state on religious tenets.[105]

On the basis of the above quote, there is no legal recourse for one religion in Turkey to destroy the art of another religion for personal gain. Which means, for both Christians and Muslims, removing the art of the other religion would violate the constitutional law of the land and therefore remnants of both the building's Muslim past and its Christian past would have to remain. It is not likely that Christian Orthodox would want the Patriarch's church to include Muslim as well as Christian art; nor would conservative Muslims who want a reminder of the past glories of the Ottoman Muslims be happy with Christian art in a mosque. Part of the objective of both sides engaged in this tug of war

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[105] Constitution of the Republic of Turkey. Amended October 17, 2001. art. XXIV. Accessed September 3, 2011
http://www.anayasa.gov.tr/images/loaded/pdf_dosyalari/THE_CONSTITUTION_OF_THE_REPUBLIC_OF_TURKEY.pdf.

is to remove all memory that the building had ever been a symbol of the other religious empire, and the return it to what they perceive to be its true nature, a representation of their religious empire.

The histories of both religions suggest it is possible to justify worshipping in the presence of the art of the other religion. The current art debate is not so much with the theology of the two religions, as it is with the politics of the Christians and Muslim groups most anxious to see worship restored to the Ayasofya. These groups tend to be the most controversial, the most vocal and most extreme, amongst their co-religionists.

However, as some conservative Muslims who do not support returning the building to a mosque have pointed out, there is a problem in that the tombs of a number of Sultans, sultanas, their children and various other family members are located inside the building. Although this was not much of an issue in the past, some members of conservative modernist reform movements in Islam find this objectionable based on interpretations of the following Hadith:

> Narrated 'Aisha: Umm Habiba and Umm Salama mentioned about a church they had seen in Ethiopia in which there were pictures. They told the Prophet about it, on which he said "If any religious man dies amongst those people they would build a place of worship at his grave and make these pictures in it. They will be the worst creature with Allah on the Day of Resurrection." Sahih Al-Bukhari, *The Book of As-Salat (The Prayer).*[106]

> The Prophet ordered a mosque to be built in a town where he was camped for a period of time. After this was done, it was noted by one of his companions:

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[106] Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans. *Summarized Sahih Al Bukhari* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1994), 176.

"Anas added: There were some graves of pagans in [the land where the Prophet had ordered the mosque to be built] and some of it were unlevelled [sic] and there were some date-palm trees in it. The Prophet ordered that the graves of the pagans be dug out and the unlevelled land be leveled and the date-palm trees be cut down." Sahih Al-Bukhari, *The Book of As-Salat (The Prayer).*[107]

Narrated 'Aisha: The Prophet in his fatal illness said, "Allah cursed the Jews and Christians because they took the graves of their Prophets as places for worship (mosques)" Aisha added, "Had it not been for that the grave of the Prophet would have been made prominent but I am afraid it might be taken (as a) place for worship (mosque). Sahih Al-Bukhari, *The Book of Funerals (Al-Jana'iz).*[108]

Interpretations of the above Hadith reinforce more recent attitudes against figurative art in Islam, as well as attitudes regarding the worshipping of false idols by including graves in places of worship. These two issues combined make the graves that are currently located in the Ayasofya unacceptable to Islamic practices in Turkey today, though obviously this has not always been an issue for the Muslims in the past. These Hadith even call into question Mehmet's authority to have converted the Ayasofya into a mosque in the first place. This highlights one of the major problems with returning the Ayasofya to a place of worship: the contradictory and sometimes inconsistent religious arguments regarding the art.

The Possibility of Sharing the Building

However, a possible alternative has suggested – that both religions share equal use of the building. This idea was first brought to the public's attention when the Ecumenical News International published an interview with Mehmet Akif Aydin, expert with the Turkish

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[107] Kahn, 176.

[108] Kahn, 333.

Presidency of Religious Affairs. In the interview, Aydin is reported to have said: "Hagia Sophia was built as a place of worship. It served people this way as a church and a mosque for more than a thousand years...As a Muslim, I'd like it to become a mosque. But if the Hagia Sophia were opened to Muslim worshippers on weekdays, it should also be opened to Christians on Sundays."[109]

Such a response, which is not elaborated at all, is not policy nor is it seen in the existing agenda of the Turkish government. The idea of sharing the Ayasofya is almost certainly aimed at sounding of the tolerance, fairness, equality and reasonableness that the European Union is demanding of Turkey. The gatekeepers of the Union are determined to guarantee a level playing field for all religious groups within the Republic. All of these religious requirements being presented to Turkey are part of a larger picture, one where as long as the Turkish government complies with all of their demands, Turkey will successfully gain membership to the Union.

The sharing of the Ayasofya is a practical idea, especially with the way secular laws are structured in Turkey. If the government would give permission to both religions to equally share the building, the government would be upholding its constitutional obligation of not showing preference to one religion over another.

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[109] "Turkish Aid Wants Hagia Sophia Restored for Muslim, Christian Worship," *Christian Telegraph,* 7 July 2011, accessed October 2, 2011, http://www.christiantelegraph.com\issue11190.html.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an attempt to explore the symbolism of the Hagia Sofia/Ayasofya through all of its incarnations. As a church the Hagia Sophia symbolized the heart of the Byzantine Empire, the power of the emperors, and their status within Christianity. As a mosque the Ayasofya symbolized the Ottoman conquest of the Byzantine Empire, the ascendancy of a new Islamic empire, and the consolidation of spiritual and temporal authority by virtue of the Sultan. The building's transformation into a museum was intended to represent a new separation between church and state in the newly formed Republic of Turkey. However, over the past eighty years, the symbolic importance of the building seems to have diminished. The continuous bickering between Turkish secularists and Turkish Muslims has overshadowed it. The principal significance left to the Ayasofya within Turkey appears to be as a metaphorical tool in the religious and political conflicts that are arising in Turkey, as the country attempts to reposition itself in the wider global arena, toward its aspiration of membership into the European Union.

Throughout most of its history, the Hagia Sophia/Ayasofya manifested its original purpose: symbolizing the interconnected authority of religion and empire. In the contemporary context, the problem lies in the past hegemony of both the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires. This historical hegemony of both these empires overshadows any present-day symbolism the building may have remaining. This dilemma is reflected in the current condition of the building. The lack of effort being put into the restoration and maintenance of the structure, both internally and externally, attest to its faded significance. The scarcity of media attention, other than infrequent news reports covering tourist visits

by heads of state, prominent religious figures or the announcement of small scale discoveries of art, is evidence that the Ayasofya has lost for many its ability to represent Christianity, Islam or Secularism. The biggest announcement over the past year has been the completion of a twenty-year restoration project. Unfortunately, the project did not accomplish much. It was hindered by financial deficiencies, lack of effectual administration, and no sense of urgency.

My final conclusion as to what should happen to the Ayasofya differs from my original impressions. After examining all the obstacles that would need to be overcome for the Ayasofya to be returned as a place of worship, which are based more in religious politics than theology – I believe there is only one viable alternative – the Ayasofya should be left as a museum. I believe this is the most appropriate solution because of the way religion is regulated in Turkey. Due to the recent in change in property laws, it might now be possible to return the building to the Christian community for use solely as a church. However, the backlash from the predominately Muslim population would make this choice highly unlikely – even though the majority of international Christian organizations do favor this option.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, it might be possible for Christians and Muslims to share use of the building, as part church – part mosque. However, the social and political obstacles that would have to be overcome make this happen, will more than likely not be achievable. In theory, this would be the most interesting of all possibilities for the potential future of the Ayasofya. In many ways, it would create a new symbolism of the building. This sharing would have the possibility of overcoming the building tumultuous

past between Christianity and Islam, and potentially allow for a new sense of equality between the two religions, as opposed to the feeling of dominance that have lingered in the centuries that have followed the Muslim triumph over Christianity.

As for re-consecrating the Ayasofya as a mosque, of all the religious choices, this is the option that is the easiest and most probable of all the religious choices. There are however several drawbacks to this option. Firstly, in contemporary times, the use of figurative art in Islam has become more of an issue of debate, as the current climate in Turkish Islam is more conservative than it was during the late Ottoman Empire. This conservative movement would more than likely require that if the building were to be restored as a mosque, all the figurative art within the building would need to be covered. As history has demonstrated, this can be done – if all of it can be found. What the restoration projects have shown through the years is that Christian mosaics sometimes appear in unexpected places, as the 2007 discovery of mosaics in a closet demonstrated.

Secondly, with there being a predominately Muslim population in the country, the Christian voice within Turkey may react negatively to this decision, but to little avail, since they lack a voice in national politics. As for international opinion, other military and economic issues of concern in the area would most likely overshadow this particular religious issue.

However, returning the building to a mosque would be to reignite the Muslim concept of religious and civil unity, and undermine the identity of the Turkish state. It would also become a huge stumbling block and impediment in Turkey's assentation into the

European Union. If the building were to become a mosque again, it would be highly controlled by the government, as all mosques in the nation are. This leads me to the conclusion that as long as there is going to be government oversight of any religious use of the building, the difficulties might well outweigh the benefits and therefore it would be better to just leave the Ayasofya as a museum.

Leaving the Ayasofya as a museum enables the past symbolism of both Christianity and Islam to be equally celebrated, which will uphold the ideological principles of the Turkish government and the desires of the majority of the population, by treating all religion equally.   The Ayasofya's symbolic past would be a more valuable contribution to world culture than attempting to overcome the formidable obstacles in returning it to a place of worship. This, however, would take a concerted effort from both the Turkish government and a consortium of international academic organizations interested in maintaining and restoring both the interior and exterior of the building. It is falling apart fast and particularly vulnerable to collapse from seismic activity.

The only major drawback that I see to the Hagia Sophia remaining a museum is that as long as it remains such visible part of Istanbul's skyline, it will continue to be a focal point for debate in the religio-political arguments. Even though there is the potential for the politics of religion to change over the next decade or so within Turkey, returning the Ayasofya to a place of worship would only agitate a growing concern about the current state of Islam and its possible future dominance in the political landscape within the Republic.

This concern can be seen in the growing voices that acknowledge that no matter how secular the government may profess to be, Turkey is in fact a Muslim republic with democratic tendencies. Despite the fact that Islam is highly regulated by the government and Constitutional laws mandate religious tolerance, Turkey's already diminished non-Muslim population is still shrinking. All the while, the visibility of Islam within the public sphere is increasing, making the population nervous that Sharia Law may be slowly on its way.

In conclusion, I believe that the symbolism of the Ayasofya as a religious institution has been left to history. Istanbul has numerous mosques and many, such as the Blue Mosque, are just as famous as the Ayasofya, and even more culturally relevant, mainly because it is still a functioning mosque. If destruction of the Ayasofya were to ever occur, the primary loss would be that of the irreplaceable historic Christian and Islamic art.

Unfortunately, the truth is the art will be lost in time no matter what. Istanbul will go on without the Ayasofya. Current construction in the city is destroying remnants of other Byzantine and Ottoman structures, which is not generating local or for that matter international outcry. This begets the question, what is so important now about the Ayasofya? I believe the answer to this question is rather simple – the Ayasofya's importance now is as a historic artifact and keeper of the history of two empires and their religious pasts that are long gone. For as symbolic as this building has been, in many ways, its final legacy is how quickly its symbolism and importance faded. The Ayasofya's symbolic future is that as a tourist attraction and as an iconic postcard image.

Other than that, as sad as this may seem, there appears to be no real importance to the Ayasofya.

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