

Turkey Becoming Islamist

by Michael Curtis



On July 10, 2020 Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that Hagia Sophia, HS, would be reopened for Muslim worship, and control over it was transferred from the ministry of culture to the directorate of religious affairs. However, although Muslim religious services are to begin there, Hagia Sophia, like Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, will be, according to official assurances, open to people of all faiths and nationalities.

Hagia Sophia, a spacious architectural masterpiece, has been a political landmark as well as a religious and cultural one, politically and symbolically important for 1400 years. In those years it has been a temple of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a Roman Catholic Cathedral for 57 years, an Orthodox temple again, a mosque, a museum and now a mosque. In 537 A.D. the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, warrior and codifier of the laws, decided to build in Constantinople the largest Christian edifice in the world, and workers came from all over the world

to build it. The dome of the building, covered with gold tiles, was the largest in the world at that time, to be outdone by Saint Peter's Basilica in the Vatican 1000 years later. Hagia Sophia (divine justice) with its numerous chapels and shrines, and beautiful mosaics, was inaugurated, the monument of Eastern Orthodoxy, and the place where emperors were crowned.

As a result of the conquest of the area in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade launched by Pope Innocent III to reclaim Jerusalem, the city of Constantinople was ransacked. HS was plundered, and treasures such as the four bronze horses, now in San Marco's Basilica in Venice, were taken. HS in 1204 became a Roman Catholic Cathedral until 1261 when Eastern Orthodox forces retook the city.

After the conquest in 1453 by the Ottomans of what was still called Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire and the city dividing Europe and Asia Minor, the 21 year-old ruler Faith Sultan Mehmed II decided to preserve HS and change it from a Christian Cathedral to a mosque. The city was renamed Istanbul. Minarets were added to HS, the Christian mosaics were covered with plaster, and panels of Arabic religious calligraphy and bearing Arabic names of God, were made. It was said to be the largest building in the world.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the regime was replaced by a new state, the Republic of Turkey. A number of political, legal, religious changes transformed the new Republic into a secular regime under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Its constitution of 1924 was amended in 1928 to end the religion of Islam as "the religion of the state." Essentially, this entailed separation of state and religion, and the active neutrality of the state in religious affairs. It was a recognition of the diversity of the nation and its religious heritage and desire for tolerance. About one fifth of the now 78 million population are adherents of Alevism, a heterodox Islamic religion, and there are Kurds,

100,000 Christians, Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and 17,000 Jews.

In 1934 President Ataturk, in his policy to modernize Turkey, turned the mosque of HS into a museum, open to all. The old Christian mosaics were restored. HS, the symbol of secularism in the country, became the most visited tourist attraction in Turkey, attracting about 3.7 million people in 2019. No religious group could hold a service inside in what was a symbol of a shared cultural heritage.

Change has come again under the presidency of Erdogan and his political party, AKP, Justice and Development Party, a party that officially promises social justice, income, roads, schools.

Two factors are evident: a more Islamist mood in governmental and some political quarters; and a nostalgia for the former Ottoman Empire. A prominent Islamist group campaigned for restoration of the country's Muslim heritage, questioned the validity of the legacy of Ataturk, and argued that HS was the personal property of Islamists. One sign of change, in October 2013, was that Turkey lifted rules banning women from wearing headscarves in state institutions, except the military, police, judiciary.

The administrative court held that the Sultan Mehmed II in 1453 had incorporated HS into a waqf, a non-transferable religious donation, which could not be legally converted into a museum. A waqf endowment, it held, cannot be changed and so the building can be changed back into a mosque. In fact, since 2013, the four minarets have broadcast daily Muslim calls to prayer, and since 2016, readings from the Koran have been held at the site. President Erdogan immediately, within hours, accepted the view of the administrative Council of State on July 10, 2020 revoking the 1934 decision of the status of HS as a museum, and holding it was registered as a mosque with its property deeds.

Erdogan, perhaps with memories of the old Ottoman Empire, has overturned the secular disposition of Turkey. Erdogan born of humble origin, one time football player, was a member of an Islamist youth organization. He became mayor of Istanbul 1994-8, a pragmatic mayor dealing with local problems of water, pollution, traffic, corruption. He founded the AKP, the Justice and Development party, which grew rapidly and in 2002 gained 34% of the national vote. Erdogan became prime minister for 11 years, while in 2007 the AKP won 46% of the national vote and in 2011 got 49% and 327 seats. In 2014 he was elected president, then largely a ceremonial office. He was reelected in June 2018, began increasing the power of the presidency and built a grandiose presidential palace in Ankara.

Becoming more autocratic the regime detained 50,000, and fired 150,000 civil servants. An attempted coup in July 2016 failed. Erdogan claimed the military plot, which cost 250 lives and almost killed him, was organized by Fethullah Gulen, scholar and leader of a civil rights organization and critic of Erdogan, but who lives in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania.

In April 2017 Erdogan narrowly won with 51% of the vote a referendum on constitutional change on increased presidential power, allowing the president to appoint major public officials, interfere in the legal system, and impose a state of emergency. In the June 2018 parliamentary election AKP won 42.5% of the vote, but in March 2019 local elections AKP lost major cities, Istanbul. Ankara, Izmir.

The issue now is whether Turkey can be regarded as on the path to becoming an Islamist state, opposed to principles of secularism. Erdogan can be seen as a devout Muslim but also as one revisiting the glory days of the Ottoman past. He has referred to members of AKP as grandsons of the Ottomans. In what has been called "Ottomanism," one image is for Turkey to be changed from a parliamentary to a presidential system, for Erdogan to be seen as an Oriental sultan, and for Turkish

foreign policy to shift away from Europe. Erdogan sometimes gives the four-finger salute, rabaa, in solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood who used this as a protest in Egypt in 2013. The regime has destroyed 500 Greek Orthodox churches in the Turkish occupied areas of Cyprus, as well as imprisoning journalists, and expelling people in North Syria. In November 2019 the status of the Byzantine Greek Orthodox church, the Chora monastery, as a museum was revoked.

Political and religious leaders and intellectuals have criticized Erdogan's decision.

Pope Francis said he was very pained by it, saying his thoughts went back to the Russian Orthodox church and Greece, which regards itself as the heir to the Byzantine empire. He expressed unhappiness that one of the world's great features of Byzantine Christian architecture was turned into a mosque. Unhappiness was also expressed by the World Council of Churches, representing 500 million Christians, the Church in Russia, the largest Orthodox Christian community, and UNESCO which has labelled HS as a world heritage site and called for an open dialogue without delay. Orhan Pamuk, the country's most famous author and Nobel Prize winner in 2006, said millions of secular Turks, like himself, were crying against the decision. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was also critical of the decision, saying that HS was a landmark, a testament to religious expression, a bridge between faiths and cultures which was reflected in its complex 1500 year history.

Some have explained Erdogan's decision as a political one, by diverting attention from the decline in support for his party and as due to conditions, the physical and economic impact of Covid-19 which may lead to a recession. Already, the economy has deteriorated with increasing inflation and unemployment.

Whatever the reason, Erdogan is ending the secular legacy of Turkey and remolding the country with an Islamist vision. Three issues are involved. There is the real possibility of

the regime introducing Sharia law, banning secularism from public cases, and moving from state neutrality to approval of religious practice. There is also the fear that Islamists will seek to reclaim other sites in the Middle East. A third problem is the possibility of Turkey breaking links with the non-Muslim Western world.

There is need for liberal secular democracies to respond to the internal changes in Turkey as well as to the direction of its foreign policy. Hagia Sophia should remain as a museum, a symbol of coexistence of people of different faiths and opinions.