

FATIH'S LEGACY: THE AYASOFYA MOSQUE

One of the places of worship that has been used for a long time in world history has been converted to its own form.

Istanbul is one of the oldest cities in the world. Istanbul is the capital of many civilizations, notably Roman, Latin, Byzantine and Ottoman. Istanbul represents the meeting between the civilizations of the West and the East. People with different beliefs have lived together in union and peace and have prayed freely in this city for centuries. Ayasofya is located in the heart of Istanbul which has all these qualities.

Back to the long term, therefore. Ayasofya was a pagan temple which was transformed into a basilica by the Romans. In 1453, immediately after the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans under Sultan Mehmed II, the basilica was converted into a mosque, keeping the same name, Ayasofya, as a symbol of conquest. Sultan Mehmed II ordered the immediate cleaning of the church and its conversion into a mosque. But the mosaics and frescoes had not covered with whitewash by order of Sultan Mehmed II. They covered with a veil to protect the main features of the building. On the other hand, the Christian relics which are until 1204 in Ayasofya, were stolen by the crusaders who occupied Istanbul during the fourth crusade. Even the Romans pillaged and ravaged Ayasofya, during numerous revolts in Istanbul.

The Saint Sophia basilica was created in the 6th century at the request of the Emperor Justinian. That is to say that Hagia Sophia was the personal property of the emperor. After the conquest, it became the personal property of Sultan Mehmet II.

Sultan Mehmet II dedicated his property (Ayasofya) with a deed of property from the Foundation. This building is the property of the "Fatih Sultan Mehmet Foundation", and is officially registered as a mosque in its deed. This is why in the light of the deed of property of the Foundation owner of the premises, Ayasofya cannot be used, from a legal point of view, for another use and that no obstacle can be erected before its function as a mosque .

Before conquest, during the Latin occupation of Constantinople, prolonged disorders occurred in Byzantium. This was expressed by Lucas Notaras with these words: "I prefer to see the Ottoman turban rather than the cardinal's hat in Byzantium". Sensitivity and tolerance have always appeared in every period of the Ottoman Empire. Not all of the churches in Istanbul were converted to mosques after the conquest. On the contrary, the majority of these structures have been carefully preserved so far. People living in Istanbul have always said their prayers as a member of the belief they wanted.

Today there are 435 churches and synagogues open for worship in Turkey. For example, the status of the Surp Krikor and Surp Hiresdagabet churches built in the 14th century is still protected from conquest today. And also, the restoration of the Saint Stephen-Bulgarian Orthodox church was done by Turkey in 2019. All this proves that the sensitivity shown towards historic places of worship without religious and racial discrimination in Turkey.

In addition, the Ottomans opened their doors to Jews who were exiled and chased from Europe in 1492. From that time on, Jews who resided in Istanbul lived freely and peacefully. The synagogue of Ahrida, which was built in the 15th century before the conquest of Istanbul, has been protected until today and still remains a place of worship in synagogue status.

On the other hand, Europe, which criticizes the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, has not been able to protect the historic mosques that were in its capitals. Even the main architectural features of these structures could not be protected. For example, the great mosque of Cordoba in Spain, which is the heritage of Andalusia and listed as World Heritage by UNESCO, was transformed into a cathedral in 1236. However, the structure of the mosque which is an example of the world architectural history, has not been protected. Today, even Muslims visit there by ticket.

We can also take the example of the buildings constructed by the Ottomans in Greece. The Fethiye Mosque of Athens which was built 9th century in 1498 at the request of Sultan Mehmed II, is currently used as an exhibition hall. The Ibrahim Pasha mosque built in 1530 in Kavala is today a church. And also, although they appear in the archives, there is today no trace of the New Mosque, Kubbeli Mosque, Ic Kale Mosque, the Tekké of Huseyin Efendi and the hammam Hadj Ali. The Old Mosque built in 1385 in Serres was demolished in 1937. A shopping center was built. Dozens of buildings have been closed for worship and others have been transformed into churches, museums, exhibition halls over the years .

When we look at Ayasofya: All the main features of Ayasofya have always been preserved. After the restoration works of the Ottoman era and the addition of minarets by the architect Mimar Sinan, Ayasofya has become one of the most important works of world architecture. All the features of Ayasofya will continue to be protected. It will be even better preserved from now on. Ayasofya will continue to shine with all its splendor.

History bears witness to the struggle to establish tolerance wherever Turkey has conquered. Today, there are 435 churches and synagogues open for worship in Turkey. Despite this, we see the opposite elsewhere. Today, there are only a few buildings built by the Ottomans in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Hagia Sophia, which was built as a pagan temple, was converted into a church by the Romans in time and finally into a mosque after the conquest of Istanbul. It is against both spirit and law that Hagia Sophia operates as a museum. As of July 2020, it was returned from the mistake of preventing worship in a magnificent temple like Hagia Sophia Mosque.

The reopening of worship in the Ayasofya Mosque is a victory from the point of view of religious freedom. Muslims, Christians, believers and non-believers, everyone can visit Ayasofya. The doors of Ayasofya will remain open to visitors from all over the world. The opening of Ayasofya to worship will not lose anything of its identity as a world cultural heritage.