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Hagia Sophia - Reconciliation or division?

"Holy Wisdom" is the Greek translation for the Byzantine church completed in 532 AD in the former Constantinople, now Istanbul. The dome of the magnificent building with its 33-metre wing span built over four pillars is still considered the largest brick dome in the world. For centuries, the building was a symbol of the existence and continuing existence of Christianity. Emperors were crowned in the cathedral and the faithful sought protection there. It was and still is an important sacral place for many. Through the history beyond the Byzantine rite, which today is practiced by the Greek Orthodox or the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, it symbolizes diversity, fellowship, heritage and memory. In 1453, after the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans, the cathedral was turned into a mosque, Christian frescoes were covered up. The Ottoman sultans of the 16th and 17th centuries built new mosques based on the model of the former Christian construction and thereby, consciously or unconsciously, adopted Christian architecture, which thus also influenced Muslim buildings of worship. On November 24th 1934 at Atatürk's initiative, the former church and mosque was turned into a museum and thereby made open to all people, whether believers or atheists. And this was also the symbolic message of the Hagia Sophia after 1934. In symbiosis with the Greek name, committed to "wisdom", this place, so holy to many people, was to be a sign of reconciliation, of common ground, of diversity in an conflict-ridden area.

Until now ... Until the day when a court in Turkey, at the request of the AKP and President Erdogan, allowed the Hagia Sophia to be turned into a mosque again. Consequently, the former church, the former mosque and the former museum, which will become a mosque again, would have to be renamed. Because this decision is not "wise". It rather denies the idea of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Atatürk, who wanted the homogeneity of a multi-ethnic state in faith, culture and language. The Hagia Sophia, open to all people in the world as a museum, was intended to symbolise the modern and outwardly open spirit of the times. Within the existence of Turkey this was more or less successful, for example, when looking at the current Kurdish conflict in the south-east Anatolian region or all the conflicts with the neighbouring states

Of course, as a commentator, I can't help but express my personal point of view, not without a certain emphasis. For I am already biased by my birth: as a Christian, born in the heart of Anatolia, but also as a democrat, who feels obliged to the universal human rights. Patriarchs, clergy and particularly high representatives of the Byzantine churches were shocked by the verdict of the Supreme Administrative Court. I, however, being a native Turk according to the legal definition, ethnically belonging to a minority of the so-called "Suryanis" - in Germany rather known as "Suryoye (Aramaic/Assyrian/Chaldean)" - which is little known in Turkey, and as a Christian, whose ancestors suffered genocide during the First World War between 1915 and 1918, committed by the Young Turks and Kurdish tribes, hoped for a Turkey of diversity, tolerance, ethnic diversity, free practice of faith, multi-ethnic cultural influences, immense and rich cultural heritage, for a deep and profound wisdom that could emerge from it. In recent years I have learned to see Turkey with different eyes. Over generations, we have always linked our destiny as faithful Christians with the goodwill of a ruler who, adapted to the particular epoch, treated us non-Muslims sometimes better, sometimes worse. The secularization of Turkey after Kemal Atatürk proclaimed the republic in 1923 changed little about the situation of non-Muslim religious communities, at least regarding the Anatolian countryside. And so the remaining Christians left the Republic of Turkey to build up a new life in the West. In this context and caught between the Turkish-Kurdish conflicts, my parents also left their old homeland with me as a two-year-old child. Grown up in Germany I participated in the values of pluralism, democracy and equal opportunities. At the same time - I could hardly pick and choose - my historical DNA gave me an aversion to Islam as a religion, as a political construct in combination with the legal corpus of the Sharia, due to religiously influenced conflicts in the Middle East, which were always just about power. As a result, I was extremely critical towards Islam, even as a spiritual source, and especially as a young person I did not act without prejudice. Due to the opportunity for self-determination in an individual society, this inevitably led to a conflict between my religious, cultural, political and also social views and my society of origin. This also led to a conflict with my parents, which is still going on. I am sure that many people with a similar historical background will not feel differently. Starting with my journalistic activities and driven by the thought of finally coming to terms with the bloody and tragic history of my ancestors in order to break the spiral of aversion towards millions of people in Turkey and millions of Muslims, I travelled to the Middle East many times. I did research, talked to the people, searched for common ground, addressed fears openly and honestly, reflected and questioned. Several times I was in Istanbul, always in the south-east Anatolian region, many times in the neighboring countries.

The experiences I have gathered started a personal, still ongoing process, which has eliminated the inherited and historical division of the world into Christian and Muslim societies. Every conversation in an extremely diverse world, every study, every painting I saw, every music I heard, every culinary delight I consumed, along with economic prosperity, welfare, security, stability and peace, helped me to understand that all the atrocities of the past were driven by something that is not religious. It is driven by power. The conflict about raw materials, territories and shipping passages, which are of immense importance for wars, was the ugly face of war crimes, which once slaughtered my

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ancestors and finally caused my parents to build up a new life in Germany. As a result, I left the utterly dogmatic path of a confessional division of the world and began to look at the people of Turkey, the diversity, the endless treasure of cultural and artificial diversity. Along the way, unfortunately, I also came across the previously hidden and often religiously whitewashed ideology of nationalism and fascism. By using religion, in this case Sunni Islam, nationalists tried in a sort of "politically - religiously dominant" doctrine to roll back the diversity of the country, the Republic of Turkey. Because in their opinion nothing else besides "Turkishness" as an ideal of a society has to exist: no other religions, no other languages, no other ethnic groups, no other cultures, and to my regret many Germans with Turkish roots agree. This contradicts the aspect, even the deepest wish of "wisdom" to be wise. It counteracts the idea of Hagia Sophia as being a place for everyone for a process of reconciliation that everyone longs for.

The turning of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque now marks the turning point in a politically - socially fueled mood, in which the egomaniacs, the alpha dogs, the patriarchs of this world, seeking to follow a certain "image of manhood", are looking for a way to mobilize an "idealized and fanatical" minority, which is against equality, gender equality, sexual development, religious freedom, freedom of the press and freedom of opinion..

In the delusion of proving to be a "man" according to patriarchal principles, it is aimed against the diversity Hagia Sophia summed up in a religiously neutral way, being the first in human mankind to do so.

This neutrality is rescinded through the decision of the supreme administrative court

People who have the freedom to believe in nothing, who feel obliged to a pluralistic society where universal human rights are the core, should take a pluralist and diverse view regarding the change of the venerable cathedral and mosque.

People who look at the past and seek a process of reconciliation cry a tragic and precious tear that slowly and painfully rolls down their cheeks, because of the missed opportunity provided by such a judgment.

Simon Jacob,

Augsburg, 11th July 2020

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