



World Heritage Watch Statement on Hagia Sophia

The Hagia Sophia is widely considered to be one of the most important buildings in the history of architecture as well as the history of religions, and indeed of world history at large. It was the last monumental building of antiquity and the biggest building of the world at its time. Both the features of its construction and its priceless mosaics and other works of art represent the highest achievements of human genius. The Hagia Sophia has been the most important church of Orthodox Christianity for over 1,000 years, and it became a symbol of Islam when it was converted into a mosque by Sultan Mehmed II after his conquest of Constantinople in 1453. And it stands, more than any other monument, for the end of the Byzantine Empire after its over 1,000 years of existence, and the rise of the Ottoman Empire to world power which was to last another 450 years. Finally, its conversion into a museum in 1934 marked the progress of civilization to a modern laicistic state of an overwhelmingly Muslim population. Its status of a museum has been an important contribution to keeping peace between the Muslim and Christian communities.

This short outline cannot do justice to the global importance of the Hagia Sophia but it may suffice to explain why this building is of such paramount importance for the world as a whole, and why it has been inscribed in the List of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1985.

The fundamental idea of the World Heritage Convention - to which the Republic of Turkey acceded in 1983 - is that the objects on the List of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage are of Outstanding Universal Value. Their cultural and/or natural significance is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole. While fully respecting the sovereignty of the States on whose territory such an object of cultural or natural heritage is situated, and without prejudice to property right provided by national legislation, the States Parties to the World Heritage Convention recognize that such heritage constitutes a World Heritage - a heritage of the entire world.

The decision to convert the Hagia Sophia to a mosque gives rise to reminding the Turkish authorities in charge to the solemn commitment the Turkish Republic has made to the world community - to us all - under international law, and to observe the relevant procedures. Any claims that matters concerning the Hagia Sophia are matters of Turkish national authorities only, and that the opinion of the international community is an infringement on Turkish sovereignty, are therefore unfounded and misleading.

It is of utmost importance that the authorities, opinion leaders and people of Turkey understand and respect the fact that the Hagia Sophia is a heritage not only of any particular ethnic, religious or other group but a heritage of all people of the world, for whom unrestrained access to the Hagia Sophia must be guaranteed. We expect that Turkey lives up to its commitment under the World Heritage Convention to "do all it can ..., to the utmost of its own resources" ... "for the protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations" of all elements which constitute the Hagia Sophia's Outstanding Universal Value.

The original motivation for building the Hagia Sophia has been to create a house of prayer, of invoking the One God, and of spiritual experience. The tangible heritage embodied in the building cannot be understood without a proper understanding of this intangible heritage which was the source of inspiration for the masterworks of art and architecture the world has admired for centuries. Both of them are inseparable and must be preserved together.

We therefore feel that opening the Hagia Sophia for prayer is not in principle in contradiction to its World Heritage status but may indeed be a complementary activity - as long as the building itself and its universal values will not be compromised. However, when doing so, the origins and the entire history of the Hagia Sophia must be adequately respected, which should entail that the building should be equally open for prayer by both Muslims and Christians. A shared house of prayer for the two religions who pray to the same One Almighty would indeed be the only credible way of confirmation and continuation of the Hagia Sophia's role as a symbol of interfaith brotherhood and peace among world civilizations. Never has the world been more in need of such symbols, and history will honour those who rather than creating division and making enemies, show greatness by building peace.

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