

Hagia Sophia Became a Mosque (again). A few Considerations on how Religious Leaders and Faith Based Organizations Poke Out on this Matter

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Summary

This study presents firstly a short review of the document *Religions for Peace Speaks Out on Hagia Sophia: Living Together with Peace and Respect* issued by *Religions for Peace*. Afterwards it presents critically some statements on the same issue published by some church leaders, ecumenical and inter-religious organizations which are mentioned in the statement of Religions for Peace (the Ecumenical Patriarch, Pope Francis, World Council of Churches, Middle East Council of Churches and King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Centre for Dialogue) as well as from other statements (those of Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem and of the Lutheran World Federation).

Keynotes: Hagia Sophia; Turkey; religious freedom; statements on Hagia Sophia.

Introduction

I have had no difficulty in choosing the theme of the document to be translated for the "Ecumenical News" of the periodical *Revista Teologica*. It had to be something about the Hagia Sophia because of the decision of the Turkish authorities to re-open it as a mosque. This matter seemed to be the most burning religious issue of this period. It is also a matter which exceeds the horizon of ecumenism, having inter-religious, but also political, cultural and geo-strategic dimensions. It was more difficult to decide which text to translate, as many churches, ecumenical and (inter-) religious organizations issued statements on this matter. I decided to translate the statement issued by *Religions for Peace* called *Religions for Peace Speaks Out on Hagia Sophia: Living Together with Peace and Respect* for two reasons: (1) it is a statement of the "world's largest multi-religious organization" and therefore representative in field of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation; and (2) it makes reference to other "powerful statements" issued by different churches, ecumenical and inter-religious organizations. This reference opens the opportunity to discuss some of these statements in this short study, after making a few commentaries on the statement of Religions for Peace.

The Statement of Religions for Peace

The short statement of Religions for Peace was authored by "faith leaders", women and men who joined their strength to speak "as one voice." It makes reference to other statements "already made about events around the Hagia Sophia." This is perhaps the reason why Religions for Peace's statement does not contain details on the history and status of Hagia Sophia and it even does not formulate a clear protest on changing the status of Hagia Sophia. Also, Turkey, as a state and Recep Tayyip Erdogan as an initiator of the re-opening of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque, are not mentioned. It focuses rather on the weight given to this statement by the fact that it is issued by "the majority of the *Religions for Peace* global membership, inclusive of Indigenous, Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Jain, Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Sikh, and Bahá'í leaders and communities."

The main principle mentioned in this statement is that Hagia Sophia is "a UNESCO World Heritage site, ... meant to be shared with all the world." Therefore Religions for Peace supports "the universality of heritage as something that can create peace and respect for all faiths." Another secondary principle is the appeal "to the highest instincts of our shared humanity, and service to the Divine within and among all". From these two principals emerge a series of six appeals as counterbalance for different forms of instrumentalization of religiosity:

- a call for calm versus "the use of religious sentiments and institutions in a manner that could be deemed as divisive";

- a recognition of the existence of "deep-rooted concerns around the (ab)use of religious sentiments, and symbols, for political purposes";

- a reaffirmation of support for peace "as we hear of the voices, and see the actions, of divisiveness and hatred from many quarters;"

- a determination of opposing the use of faith "in the service of the interests of the few today."

- a pledge for "the civil state that guarantees peace and equal freedom to all inhabitants, respects religious liberties, ensures equal rights to all religions and guarantees the rule of law";

- a commitment "to modeling the call we make to all: to show mercy, love and compassion" versus any use of power;

- an urge "for mercy and respect towards one another", a declaration of "love for one another as people of faith" and a demonstration of compassion "in these troubled times."

- a recognition of the existence "of deep rooted ties to various religious houses and sites of worship" is aimed to increase the belief "that respecting the sanctity and symbolism of such places, is honoring our collective human dignity."

Other aspects of this statement which need to be highlighted are:

- The mentioning of the existence of "physical, virtual, visible and invisible" pulpits in all religions which is an allusion to the pandemic the world is confronted with;
- The affirmation: "Our houses of worship reside, foremost, inside each and all of us on this earth" seems to be aimed to dilute inflexibilities regarding ownership of some sacred places. However, recognition of the existence of "deep rooted ties to various religious houses and sites of worship" and the reference to "collective human dignity" seems to be aimed to transmit the following message: possession of holy sites is important but not crucial for expressing religiosity.

Statements on Hagia Sophia mentioned in the Statement of Religions for Peace

Religions for Peace' statement mentions a few other „powerful statements" of Hagia Sophia and seems to endorse them. My intention is to briefly present and comment here some of the most important statements on Hagia Sophia, firstly those mentioned in Religions for Peace' statement and afterwards some other statements.

The first statement mentioned is the one issued by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew entitled *Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew about Hagia Sophia*.¹ It was issued on 30th June 2020 at the feast of the 12 Apostles during the Divine Liturgy celebrated in the church of 12 Apostles at Feriköy, Istanbul. The first aspect which needs to be mentioned is that the website of the Ecumenical Patriarchate calls it a "comment concerning the fate of Hagia Sophia" and not a statement. In fact it is a personal comment made *ad personam* by the Ecumenical Patriarch and not an institutional statement of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

This comment starts by mentioning a letter addressed in 2016 by the Ecumenical Patriarch to the Director of Religious Affairs which expressed "concern for the proposed alteration of the status of Hagia Sophia." That letter mentioned that "this unique monument obtained sacred value for both monotheistic religions" as it served 900 years as a place of worship for Christians and 500 years for the Muslims. Therefore it would be "detrimental" if Hagia Sophia "which, due to its dedication to the Wisdom of God is a point of encounter ... for the faithful of both religions, to become, in the 21st century, a cause of confrontation and conflict"

Hagia Sophia, being "one of the most significant monuments of universal civilization" – i.e. it "transcends the boundaries of the people and the time of its creation and that it does not belong only to its possessors, but to the whole humanity" – the Ecumenical Patriarch calls the Turkish people to take this responsibility for the fate of Hagia Sophia: "In this sense the Turkish people has the great responsibility and

¹ See <https://www.ecupatria.org/2020/06/30/ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-about-hagia-sophia/>

the highest honor to give prominence to the universality of this exquisite monument.” At the same time it is clear that the Ecumenical Patriarch pledges for keeping the status of a museum given to Hagia Sophia in 1923: As museum, Hagia Sophia can function as place and symbol of encounter, dialogue and peaceful coexistence of peoples and cultures, mutual understanding and solidarity between Christianity and Islam, which is extremely vital and beneficial for the contemporary world.”

The last paragraph of this ”comment” makes reference to the words of ”a notable Turkish journalist” who observed that ”it seems that the youth is turned more intensively towards arts and culture.” The Ecumenical Patriarch uses these words of the Turkish journalist to build his final argument in favor of keeping the status of Hagia Sophia as a museum. Firstly he addresses two questions: ”Shouldn’t this turn of the youth be an issue of concern for all of us? Shouldn’t we also turn towards the common principles, towards the ideals that unite the youth of both religions, an initiative that would safeguard a better future for humankind, instead of highlighting and bringing back to the foremost issues that cause divisions and tensions?”

The final appeal to ”Turkish people” is quite powerful: ”The conversions of Hagia Sophia, which, due to its sacredness, is a vital center where East embraced the West, will fracture these two worlds, more so at a time when the afflicted and suffering mankind, due to the deadly pandemic of the new coronavirus, is in need of unity and common orientation.”

Apart from the nature of this ”comment” which clearly tries to protect the institution of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its fragile status in Turkey, one may observe that the tone is rather peaceful. There are no sharp words in this comment, as the Ecumenical Patriarch seems to know that a more protesting tone might not be helpful. However, the last words, while keeping the same diplomatic-byzantine tone, clearly present the risks which the Turkish authorities take upon, by changing the status of a symbolic building such as Hagia Sophia. It seems that the comment is addressed to ”Turkish people,” but it is certainly aimed to be heard by President Erdogan.

Pope Francis² made also some references on the issue of Hagia Sophia on the second Sunday of July which is also called the International Day of the Sea, or ”Sea Sunday.” As this event took place shortly after Erdogan announced the decision to turn Hagia Sophia back into a mosque, the pope said: I think on Hagia Sophia and I am very saddened.” One may expect a more extensive statement on Hagia Sophia from the Pope of Rome. On the other hand, such short and personally minded declarations seem to be part of the style of the present pope to express himself on issues happening in the world.

² <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-07/angelus-pope-remembers-seafarers.html>

The World Council of Churches (WCC)³ took a position through a letter dated 11 July 2020, signed by its Interim General Secretary and addressed to the President of the Republic of Turkey, R. C. Erdogan. As one reads the letter, it is obvious that its text benefited from the contribution of present and/or former WCC employees belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate as well as of Central Committee members from the same church. For more efficiency, the text of the letter was translated in Turkish and sent also in that form to its addressee, as WCC website proofs.⁴ The letter starts by affirming – somehow surprisingly – that the status of museum of Hagia Sophia is “a powerful expression of the Republic of Turkey’s commitment to secularist and inclusion and of its desire to leave behind the conflicts of the past.” It continues with some harsh words: the signatory of the letter conveys “the grief and dismay of the WCC ... at the step” taken by Erdogan. “By deciding to convert the Hagia Sophia back to a mosque you have reversed that positive sign of Turkey’s openness and changed it to a sign of exclusion and division. Regrettably, this decision has also been taken without prior notice or discussion with UNESCO regarding the impact of this decision on Hagia Sophia’s universal value recognized under the World Heritage Convention.”

After mentioning WCC involvement over the decades in interreligious dialogue and in supporting other religious communities than the Christian ones, “including Muslim communities,” the letter mentions what shall be the impact of the decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque: it “will inevitably create uncertainties, suspicions and mistrust, undermining all our efforts to bring people of different faiths together at the table of dialogue and cooperation. Moreover, we greatly fear that it will encourage the ambitions of other groups elsewhere that seek to overturn the existing status quo and to promote renewed divisions between religious communities.” As President Erdogan “repeatedly affirmed Turkey’s identity as a secular state” the letter “urgently appeal(s)” to the Turkish President “to reconsider and reverse” his decision. The final paragraph of the letter express WCC’s support to His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew “in expressing ... fervent hope and prayer that Hagia Sophia will not become again a focus of confrontation and conflict, but will be restored to the emblematic unifying role that it has served since 1934.”

³ file:///C:/Users/nicolae.chifar/Downloads/20_7_11%20Letter%20to%20President%20Erdogan.pdf

⁴ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news-in-other-languages/wcc-cumhur-baskani-erdogana-gonderdigi-mektupla-ayasofyanin-insanligin-ortak-mirasi-olarak-korunmasi-cagrisinda-bulundu>

A statement⁵ signed by the same Interim General Secretary and endorsed by WCC Executive Committee at the end of its meeting at 24th July 2020 acknowledges that "despite the appeals of Christian leaders around the world and many members of the international community, including a number of prominent Muslim leaders, the decision to reconvert the Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque was implemented, with Muslim Friday prayers being heard in the ancient building for the first time since the 1930s." It is also mentioned that the WCC Executive Committee and its member churches from different regions and traditions "joined in prayer and sorrow with millions of Christians around the world marking this sad day in the history of Christianity and of inter-religious relations." Some of the churches expressed their sorrow by "ringing the bells as a sign of mourning." Especially affected by this decision are "Christians of the Orthodox family" for whom Hagia Sophia "holds a very special significance." The statement also mentions "all Turkish citizens who do not feel represented in this action by their government."

Middle East Council of Churches⁶ which is a regional ecumenical organization representing various Christian traditions, including Catholic traditions, expressed in a statement issued by its General Secretariat in which considers the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque "an assault on religious freedom." It calls "for a decisive position from the United Nations and the League of Arab States by filing a legal appeal against the Turkish Supreme Court's decision."⁷ It states that the decision of the Turkish authorities "undermines all ecumenical initiatives and interfaith dialogues that took place in the last three decades." The statement concludes: "The whole world is called upon to firmly and consciously stand together against this decision. All societal and religious authorities living in Turkey must fully mobilize at all levels to put an end to this aggression and transgression, in a way that preserves the true meaning of coexistence in all its profundity."⁸

The board⁹ of King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Dialogue¹⁰ issued also a statement in which affirms "the unique status of Hagia Sophia has for the last century represented a universal beacon of interreligious consensus based on principles of dialogue, mutual respect and peace." The Board "calls on all parties to

⁵ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/wcc-statement-on-hagia-sophia>

⁶ <https://www.mecc.org/mecc/2020/7/11/the-middle-east-council-of-churches-the-turkish-governments-decision-to-convert-the-hagia-sofia-church-into-a-mosque-is-violation-of-religious-freedom-and-coexistence>

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ <https://www.kaiciid.org/news-events/news/board-statement-hagia-sophia-status-change>

¹⁰ <https://www.kaiciid.org/>

arrive at an acceptable solution that will allow Hagia Sophia to retain its global historical and cultural significance and to continue to serve as testament to so many shared values across our religious traditions.”

Other Statements on Hagia Sophia

His Beatitude Theophilos III, Patriarch of Jerusalem issued a statement regarding the keeping status of Hagia Sophia.¹¹ As he found out with “utmost seriousness” about the decision of the Turkish government “to alter the current status of the Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque”, his statement pledged for keeping “an extend of neutrality over this side.” Patriarch Theophilos III presents the patriarchate he leads, as keeping a tremendous experience in the stewardship of holy places “over which three Abrahamic faiths lay equal claim .” Based on this experience, Patriarch Theophilos “strongly attests ... that accessibility promotes peace and mutual respect, whereas attitudes of exclusivity promote conflict and bitterness.”

In a letter¹² addressed by the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation Rev. Dr. Martin Junge to the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan affirms that the transformation of Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque undermines the meaning of “a publicly shared space” that “symbolizes openness and inclusiveness.” Dr. M. Junge calls for dialogue and consultation for reaffirming Hagia Sophia which is part of the world cultural heritage “as a space for interreligious dialogue and understanding that points to our common humanity.” Dr. M. Junge highlights “a great risk of this decree stoking animosity and antagonism, emboldening still very prevalent hateful populist or nationalistic rhetoric globally.” The letter ends with a strong support for inter-religious dialogue presented as a core value of the Lutheran World Federation.

¹¹ <https://www.mecc.org/news-en/2020/7/13/statement-of-his-beatitude-patriarch-theophilos-iii-on-the-status-of-hagia-sophia-shrine?rq=Sophia>

¹² <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/preserve-hagia-sophia-shared-heritage-lwf-urges-turkey>