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The Third Conquest of Constantinople: The Symbolism of Hagia Sophia's Reconversion to a Mosque

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Abstract: This article discusses the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque in 2020. Examining this act through the prism of the neo-Ottoman political platform and with consideration of the meaning and importance of this historic cultural monument, it is inferred that the reconversion constitutes a political decision *par excellence*, intended to symbolically mark the beginning of a new era for Turkey while closing the chapter of Kemalism. In doing so, the current political establishment seeks to communicate its resolution to invert the process of secularisation, as a form of revanche for the Westernisation of the country and the identity erosion that it caused. Further, the reconversion symbolically connotes the conquest of Constantinople and the triumph of Islam over Christianity anew, harking back to past glories and upholding them as guidelines for the future, thus hinting to a revisionist political agenda, applicable both domestically and abroad, intended, according to rhetoric at least, to consolidate Turkey as a regional power and a worthy successor of the Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: Hagia Sophia; Turkey; neo-Ottomanism; conversion; mosque; Constantinople; Erdoğan



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1. Introduction

Hagia Sophia's reconversion to a mosque has been quite a controversial issue and made headlines internationally. A cultural monument of high significance and a long history, an architectural and engineering accomplishment, the jewel of Orthodox Christianity universally, the object of desire and major conquest of the Ottomans, it justly constitutes a World Heritage site. It has been converted to a place of worship twice following the conquest of Constantinople, to a Catholic cathedral (1204) and a mosque (1453), and to a museum in the secularist era of Kemal (1934), only to be converted to a mosque again in 2020. Its conversions largely reflect the political developments and denote the state of affairs as regards power shifts, dominant religion and the ruling class of the time.

This paper argues that Hagia Sophia was reconverted to a mosque in order to connote and signify the consolidation of Erdoğan's vision of Turkey under his leadership. As the main means of interpretation of the reconversion, Hagia Sophia's conversions are taken into account as main stations of its historical trajectory, while the transition from Kemalism to neo-Ottomanism provides the explanatory framework and the essential insights into the causes behind this historic, internationally controversial decision. In assessing the shift to neo-Ottomanism and the consequences that are of relevance to the topic at hand, it is argued that the reconversion was meant to symbolically operate as a victory over secularism and Westernisation, to signify the triumph over Christianity and consolidate Islamic Turkishness as the predominant national identity, as well as denote

and connote Turkey's leadership of the Sunni Muslim world and its role as regional power, particularly in formerly Ottoman territories. Hence, the 'Third Conquest' metaphor, whereby the legitimacy of the reconversion is founded, among others, upon religious arguments referring to the prophecy of Muhammad and the obligation to its fulfilment.

2. Hagia Sophia, More than a Place of Worship

Hagia Sophia is not just another place of worship, nor a neglectable cultural monument, and it would be useful to make a brief reference to its lasting grandeur. It has been universally revered and marvelled at, ever since its erection, which took place between the years 532 and 537. Notably, it still bears the same name as that of its inauguration, i.e., Hagia Sophia, *Ἁγία Σοφία* in Greek, meaning 'Holy Wisdom'. It was meant, from the outset, to constitute the main, major place of worship of the Byzantine Empire and it was intended to be emblematic and imposing. In terms of scale, suffice it only to consider that until the 15th century and the construction of the Duomo in Florence, it had the largest dome in the world. Architecturally and aesthetically, it set the standard for the future as both Orthodox churches and mosques have evidently been inspired by the paradigm that it set (Cohen 2015).

The first church named 'Hagia Sophia' to be built in roughly the same location was a basilica with a wooden roof, not far from the church of St. Irene, and subsequent to its consecration in the year 360, it was rendered the patriarchal church, while operating as one with St. Irene. It was completely destroyed in 404 AD by a fire that erupted due to public unrest, owed to the exile of the then-Patriarch of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom. The second 'Hagia Sophia' was built during the reign of Emperor Theodosius II and was consecrated on 10 October 415. Not unlike its predecessor, it too would burn in January 532 in the turmoil of another public unrest, the Nika Riot (Stoufi-Poulimenou 2021). This time though, Emperor Justinian I, who had successfully contained and eliminated the uprising, aspired to erect a monumental, uniquely splendid church in the same location. The ambitious project was carried out by the "engineers—chief architects/master builders (mechanopoioi) Anthemios from Tralles and Isidore from Miletus of Asia Minor" (Stoufi-Poulimenou 2021, p. 27), supervised by the emperor himself and completed within just five years, which is impressively swift for a project of such scale, opulence and engineering challenges. It was consecrated by Justinian I on 27 December 537, amidst public festivities, and the emperor could hardly contain his enthusiasm as he exclaimed "*Νενίκησά σε Σολομών!*" (I defeated you, Solomon!)" (Stoufi-Poulimenou 2021, p. 29).

This exclamation was not unjustified, considering that the world had never seen an architectural and structural engineering feat as such before: the building comprised structural innovations and use of advanced building materials "lighter and more plastic than solid stone or concrete which allowed for the dome to create an internal space not surpassed in Western Europe for 1000 years" (Cohen 2015, online). Its art redefined the concept of beauty in early Byzantium—I am using the term Byzantium as a convenience here—and thereafter represented a paradigm shift in the corresponding religiocultural aesthetic, pertaining to the way sensations and perceptions are experienced. It would not be amiss to maintain that this new paradigm transformed the lived religious experience, and by extension, Hagia Sophia has been central in co-shaping an early and subsequent Byzantine identity, aesthetically and symbolically (Schibille 2014). At the same time, its exterior is still equally striking. Located on the European side of Constantinople, the observer can clearly see Hagia Sophia from a very long distance even nowadays, let alone centuries ago when it was without question the tallest and most noticeable structure in the city, making a statement with its architecturally distinctive characteristics (Schibille 2014).

No wonder Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, present-day Istanbul, is internationally the most famous of all namesake churches dedicated to God's Wisdom, as it has symbolically conveyed the spiritual particularity and grandeur of the Byzantine Empire ever since its inauguration in 537 AD, for centuries to come. It underscores the peak of creativity in architecture and religious arts and craftsmanship with its structural innovation, intricate decoration, opulent materials and mosaics of exceptional beauty, while enhancing the spiritual experience with its iconographical programme, highlighted by the natural light diffused by the hundred windows of the dome and reflected by opulent ornaments. Indeed, it has constituted an otherworldly experience to worshippers. As a fine example of cultural heritage, centuries later, unsurprisingly, Hagia Sophia would be deemed a protected world cultural heritage site by UNESCO (Charakopoulos and Gavrilov 2021). Yet, for those who have an acute historical awareness, particularly the Christian Orthodox people, Hagia Sophia "The Great Church, this beacon of Orthodoxy" is identified with Byzantine history and the trajectory of the empire (Charakopoulos and Gavrilov 2021, p. 13). Furthermore, it set an example for future generations, one that transcends religion, denomination, culture and even civilization, thus creating a lasting legacy for posterity.

3. The Conquests of Constantinople and the Conversions of Hagia Sophia

April 1204 had a catastrophe in store for the Byzantine Empire as the armies of the Catholic Church, *en route* to the Holy Lands, while on their Fourth Crusade campaign, conquered the exultant city of Constantinople and sacked it, demonstrating no humanity or mercy, neither to the inhabitants nor to the sacred materiality and precious artefacts thereof (Phillips 2005). They did not spare Hagia Sophia either, as the church itself was looted and ransacked. The very altar was stripped of gold and silver items and ornaments, as were the pulpit and doors, among others, and together with all kinds of other items and utensils of value, all treasures were shipped to the West, with Venice being their main destination. Before the church was converted to a Latin diocese, according to Niketas Choniates, pack animals were brought into the place of worship to be loaded (Stoufi-Poulimenou 2021). Choniates' exclamation sums up the situation: "*Thus it was that Constantine's fair city, the common delight and boast of all nations was laid waste by fire and blackened by soot, taken and emptied of all wealth, public and private, as well as that which was consecrated to God . . .*" (Madden 1992, p. 72).

On 16 May 1204, the status quo of the Middle Ages would be officially altered irreparably, and the world order would be shifted, as the crusaders had conquered Constantinople, sacked it and claimed Hagia Sophia for their own, believing their actions to be sanctioned by God. A crusader was crowned Emperor in Hagia Sophia, following Catholic mass; Baldwin of Flanders sat on the throne of the Byzantine cathedral (Phillips 2005). Hagia Sophia was never returned to its previous glory, even after 1261, when the Palaiologans reconquered the city and restored the church to its Orthodox function as patriarchal (Stoufi-Poulimenou 2021). The damage inflicted was so great and the consequences so lasting and multifaceted, considering that the paradigm shift that ensued and the domino effect that it triggered were never reversed, that in 2001 Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Athens, expressed regret by way of an extraordinary statement, thus apologising to the Orthodox Church of Greece and by extension to Eastern Orthodoxy: "*It is tragic that the assailants, who set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their brothers in the faith. That they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret*" (Phillips 2005, p. xiii). Neither Constantinople nor Hagia Sophia would remain Byzantine and Orthodox for much longer thereafter, as the blow suffered in 1204, from fellow Christians no less, together with

the gradual decline of the Byzantine Empire, rendered the future catastrophe for the city and Orthodox Christendom inevitable.

As Papayianni puts it, “Constantinople was living on borrowed time for some years before its fall” (Papayianni 2010, p. 31). The city stood on the fault line as a frontier between Christianity and Islam in an 800-year-long struggle for the ‘true faith’. Following successive failed Arab campaigns, it was finally the Turks who reanimated the spirit of *jihad*, delivering a decisive blow in the spring of 1453 (Crowley 2005). Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos and his army held the under-siege city for six weeks. Yet, on 29 May, he and his fellow combatants would fall while fighting, as the Turks poured into Constantinople, thus ending a long Christian reign (Harris 2010). In accordance with Islamic tradition, since Caliph Omar’s era, should a city capitulate, it would not be subject to pillage but would rather be subject to some form of taxation for protection. Further, the places of worship of Jews and Christians would be retained, with some constraints applying. This was not the case with Constantinople since it resisted to the bitter end: Mehmet II had promised his armies their three days of looting and pillaging. “They slew everyone that they met in the streets, men, women and children without discrimination. The blood ran in rivers down the steep streets from the heights of Petra towards the Golden Horn” (Runciman 1965, p. 145).

The material and religious wealth of the city was not spared either. Treasures were taken, books and icons were destroyed and desecrated to have their precious ornamental decorations removed, mosaics and marbles were hacked off. Christian artefacts were also desecrated, such as the Icon of the Hodēgētria (Gr. *Οδηγήτρια*), the Mother of God, in the Monastery of the Holy Saviour in Chora, said to have been crafted by Saint Luke himself (Runciman 1965). Places of worship such as churches and monasteries offered little to no sanctuary as their gates were battered down and their congregations fell prey to their captors: “Veils and scarves were torn off the women to serve as ropes. Many of the lovelier maidens and youths and many of the richer-clad nobles were almost torn to death as their captors quarrelled over them” (Runciman 1965, p. 147). Sultan Mehmed II, upon entering the city in the afternoon, made his way to Hagia Sophia. Once in the cathedral, the sultan ordered to have it converted to a mosque immediately. “One of his *ulema* climbed into the pulpit and proclaimed there was no God but Allah. He himself then mounted on to the altar slab and did obeisance to his victorious God” (Runciman 1965, p. 149).

Constantinople had long been an object of desire, and within it Hagia Sophia. Bayezid I, Mehmed II’s great-grandfather, approximately half a century earlier, yearned to conquer the city and convert the cathedral to a mosque. This was no coincidence as it would constitute a highly prestigious feat, and Hagia Sophia was held in the highest regard. Mehmed II shared his great-grandfather’s admiration for the celebrated city and its magnificent cathedral. As regards the former, he declared it the capital of his growing empire while maintaining its name: Constantinople (Necipoğlu 1992). What is more, after successive Arab defeats that failed to realise what was long desired, through his conquest, Mehmed II fulfilled a long-standing prophecy of Prophet Muhammad, which foresaw Muslim victory, starting thus the Islamic era for both the city and the monument: “They will conquer Constantinople. Hail to the Prince and the army to whom this is granted” (Necipoğlu 1992, p. 199).

There is a pronounced mythical dimension in the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a royal mosque, drawing from popular legends and prophetic tradition, which seek to justify this conversion, namely, of the foretold final triumph of Islam over Christianity, thus deeming Hagia Sophia a bastion of the latter. The conversion was not nominal—on the contrary, the original name is still preserved to date—but aesthetic and architectural, so as to reflect its new use as a mosque on a symbolic level (Necipoğlu 1992). For example, Mehmed II made sure to install artefacts and objects that commemorate his conquest. Adaptations

and additions based on the same rationale continued; for example, in 1526, Suleiman the Magnificent contributed two sizeable candleholders, taken as trophies from the cathedral of Buda, to commemorate his own victory over the Hungarian kingdom, “the death of the Hungarian king, and the destruction of Hungary’s churches” (Necipoğlu 1992, p. 204).

All in all, Hagia Sophia continued to be decorated with symbolic spoils of the victories of “holy warfare” (Ibid.) and the triumphs of Islam as the Ottoman Empire expanded territorially. Unfortunately, the church’s conversion to a mosque entailed the loss of valuable Christian Orthodox art and centuries-old cultural heritage. Indicatively, in 1573, Sultan Selim II added three minarets and had intricate mosaics of the iconographic programme covered, with the exception of the archangels located in the eastern niche, the Platytera and the Pantocrator, with the latter being plastered over in 1610 in the era of Ahmet I. Under the rule of Abdul Mejid I, in the year 1847, maintenance works took place, which preserved the famous mosaics, crafted by the renowned Fossati brothers, only to have them plastered again. The list of notable artists and craftsmen whose works have now been lost, apart from the Fossati brothers, includes W. Salzenberg, P. Durand and C. Loos (Stoufi-Poulimenou 2021).

The Lausanne Peace Treaty of 24 July 1923 meant the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish state. Already, the abolition of the Sultanate on 1 November 1922 had severed administrative ties with the Ottoman Empire; this was followed by the declaration of the Republic on 29 October 1923 and the unanimous election of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as its first president, with Ismet İnönü forming the first government of the republic the next day (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism n.d. online). The reforms that followed were not superficial, they were sweeping and meant to actually usher the newly founded republic into modernity. To mention a few, indicatively, they included equal gender rights, the introduction of surnames, sartorial reforms, the adoption of the international calendar and the new Turkish alphabet and generally far-reaching social, judicial, educational and cultural reforms (Ibid.). Within this sociopolitical context, Hagia Sophia was converted into a museum in 1934. This was undone on 24 July 2020, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reconverted the church to a mosque and held the Islamic prayer there after 86 years, much to the dismay of the international community (Stoufi-Poulimenou 2021).

4. From Kemalism to Neo-Ottomanism

Breaking with the old and welcoming the new, meaning the deposition of the Sultan and the abolition of his institution, was liberating for the Turks. Westernisation was now introduced from the top down, allowing it to take shape in society, free of the feeling of guilt and the compulsion to conform with the Ottoman and by extension Muslim tradition (Rustow 1968). Kemalism, i.e., the political doctrine that ushered the newly founded Turkish state and its institutions and structures into the post-Ottoman era, more so in the 1920s and 30s, was named after the father of the modern Turkish state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Kemalism transcended the typical ideological trends of the political spectrum and emerged as an ideology in its own right (Mateescu 2006). This political doctrine, which was ultimately ideologised, initially comprised four principles, namely, nationalism, secularism, republicanism, and populism (Tr.: *milliyetçilik, layiklik, cumhuriyetçilik, halkçılık*), with statism and revolutionism (*devletçilik, inkılabçılık*) included in 1931 and nationalism being the overarching principle that permeates the doctrine’s fundamental values and principles (Mateescu 2006).

Although there is no absolute consensus of whether Kemalism constitutes an ideology, it is largely accepted that it severed ties with the Ottoman era. The aforementioned reforms pertaining to the abolition of the Caliphate, the closing of religious schools, the

secular educational system, etc., within the framework of the secularisation/laicisation principles, have been discussed and debated extensively as they challenged established Islamic institutions of the ulema, i.e., the upper religious class of the Ottoman caliphate (Şeker 2007). Formally, the goal of secularisation was the separation of state and religion, yet the latter was reined into the firm control of the former, with institutions and staff being under state control while religion's removal from given spheres of governance was partial and selective (Şeker 2007). Ultimately, the end result was the co-optation of religion by the state.

From the outset, the aim was to control the sway of Islam over society and, by extension, its power. This was done with the assumption that it would instil conservative values and overstate the Islamic identity—which demographically was the dominant one among others in the Ottoman and subsequent Turkish society—at the expense of the overarching nationalist Turkish collective self-perception and political identity (Mellon 2006). In this context, the above co-optation was meant to bureaucratised religion rather than to separate it from the state. Not to mention that this form of relations between religion and state also served as a containment and suppression mechanism of minority religions and creeds, considering the legal obstructions in erecting new places of worship or maintaining the old ones. In fact, it would not be amiss to speak of nationalist-religious intolerance for minorities, either religious, e.g., Christian Orthodox, or ethnolinguistic such as the Kurds, particularly considering the above restrictions in allowing the building and preservation of religious buildings other than Sunni Muslim, affected not only Christian communities, but even Alevis (Mellon 2006). Therefore, it is worth noting that the Kemalist modernisation and secularisation project was quite unlike similar political endeavours in the West. Further, the presumed break from the Ottoman past was neither total nor absolute, as the traces of continuity between regimes as regards the second-classness of ethnoreligious minorities were tangible, and the conversion of Hagia Sophia to a museum should be seen in this light as well, i.e., in the broader sociopolitical context and not as an isolated act of secularisation.

The Kemalist state did not operate in a vacuum nor was it established *ab initio*. It inherited a fundamental social structure and hierarchy that was carried over from the Ottoman administration, whereby the second classness of non-Muslims persevered, and their otherness was distinctly pronounced when juxtaposed to the vision of Muslim Turkishness; they did not adhere to the Turkish paradigmatic “imagined community” and by extension to the “political contract” thereof (Gürpınar and Kenar 2016, p. 60). In other words, group religiosity was a primary determinant of identity and belonging. Hence, Greeks and Armenians, for example, were deemed inassimilable. The centrality of religion in the definition and perception of Turkishness continued well through the twentieth century and is still going strong, such that Islam and Turkishness are considered inseparable, with the latter inconceivable without the former (Gürpınar and Kenar 2016).

Cases in point that secularism and religious fundamentalism are not necessarily mutually exclusive would be the Greek Orthodox minority or the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Under Kemalist secularism, the Greek Orthodox minority suffered discrimination. Their demographic decline, from 110,000 people in 1923 to approximately 2,000 currently, is telling of the conditions and challenges concerning community life. As for the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, suffice it only to mention that the state has persistently refused to recognise its ecumenical jurisdiction as well as its legal personality (Prodromou 2005). Especially as regards the demographic decline of the Greek community, the Istanbul Pogrom, also known as *Septemvriana* (Gr.: Σεπτεμβριανά) (de Zayas 2007), stands as proof that Muslim nationalism has been diachronically both a top-down and bottom-up process. In passing, the Pogrom that took place between 6 and 7 September 1955 and resulted in the flight of the Greek community from the city was orchestrated

by the Adnan Menderes administration. Notably, though, the atrocities were carried out by militia and an anonymous mob alike and soon spun out of control. The violence, terror and extensive destruction of properties, businesses and churches was intended to terrorise Greeks out of their homes and function as a form of ethnic cleansing; “It can be characterized as a ‘crime against humanity’, comparable in scope to the November 1938 *Kristallnacht* in Germany” (de Zayas 2007, p. 137).

All things considered, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA), also known as the Directorate of Religious Affairs in some sources (Tr.: *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), was founded in 1924 by the Kemalist regime as a successor institution to the Ottoman *Sheih-ul-Islam* office, was intended to operate as a coopted apparatus in the service of Turkish nationalism. A major function included the monitoring of proper sermon delivery across the country and the cultivation of an ethos in accordance with the principles and values of the state. The same rationale continued into the transition to the multi-party system in 1950 and onwards (Gürpınar and Kenar 2016). Shaping a homogeneous moral community also entailed historical dimensions within a given geographical demarcation and the recurrent commemoration of outstanding historical events: “The four historical events that are persistently and exhaustively commemorated are; the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmed II in 1453, the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915, the Battle of Dumlupınar in the Turkish Independence War in 1922 and the Battle of Manzikert” (Gürpınar and Kenar 2016, p. 69), while a noteworthy sermon of the same logic calls for “vigilance of conquest and *jihad*”, referring to the “conquest of Istanbul in 1453 and the invasion of Cyprus in 1974” (Ibid., p. 70). It would not be out of place, then, to infer that although the Kemalist regime sought to separate historical Turkishness from Islam, it encompassed the latter as a constitutive identity element at the same time, albeit in a secular context.

The election of the Justice and Development Party (Tr.: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in 2002 ushered in a new era where the Kemalist political heritage was presumably challenged. This did not happen overnight as it has been taking place gradually to date, given that the AKP has remained in power ever since and has had plenty of time to morph into its current form. It has been transitioning from a mode of administration that was perceived in the West as setting an example for the region of the Middle East, to an illiberal, competitive and even authoritarian regime in the view of some sources (Christofis 2023). This process has been deemed as a break from Kemalism. Ironically enough, Erdoğan had already been arguing in favour of a New Turkey (Tr.: *Yeni Türkiye*) as early as 2010, bestowing thus the opposite meaning and substance to the term originally used by the Young Turks who advocated for reforms and modernisation of the Ottoman Empire. Notably, the term was also adopted by the Kemalist regime, and it appears that Erdoğan’s inversion of the meaning of the term serves as a means to reconstruct the Turkish collective narrative anew (Christofis 2023). This reconstruction has been gradual, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has had plenty of time to apply it, from 2002 to date, as prime minister and as president as of 2014 (Goodyear 2021).

This revision is part and parcel of the place of Turkey in the international society of states. Rather than being torn between East and West, serving as a bridge between the two, while being neither according to the Huntingtonian assessment (Huntington 1997), the AKP is consistently seeking to reverse the defeat and dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and restore its legacy (Christofis 2023). Being ultimately a matter of collective paradigmatic identity, this has had both a domestic and an international political bearing. The far-reaching and lengthy nation-building process that was meant to give rise to a secular nation-state, the Kemalist paradigm, was now being challenged by the AKP and its nostalgia for the Ottoman past and the central role of Islam therein (Ege 2022).

To the Kemalist Westernisation, via the AKP, Erdoğan counter-suggests and introduces anti-Westernism. Failures of the Kemalist regime are brought into the public political discourse, while great emphasis is placed on the thesis that it has been submissive to the West, and the practices of cultural westernisation have been one-sided and undemocratic. In addition, the historical dissociation with the Ottoman era has been deemed false, and instead, continuity is held as accurate, while its heritage of an Islamic-centred value system is deemed much more representative in the context of conservative democracy. It is no surprise then that the AKP has sought to Islamise Turkish politics within the framework of ‘New Turkey’ and reinstate religion as a defining element of national identity (Ege 2022), although in my view this was never essentially removed from the ideal type of Turkishness. The *Diyanet*, i.e., Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA), was already co-opted by the Kemalist regime; therefore, its instrumentalisation by the AKP in order to further the Islamist ideological agenda via declarations and fatwas has not been surprising either. Indicative of the anti-Westernist trajectory is the fact that the Europeanisation process, which should pay heed to a set of rules and conditions prerequisite for Turkey if it was ever to join the EU, has gradually shifted to de-Europeanisation and then on to Transactionalism (Ege 2022). Although the AKP initially appeared to largely maintain the secularist political tradition while seeking closer cooperation and accession to the European Union (EU), as of 2011, the Islamist agenda has become prevalent, with the glorification of the Ottoman past and the essentialisation of Sunni Muslim values becoming integral to Turkishness. Philosophy and secular courses have been discarded, with the educational emphasis shifting to theology and history, while Erdoğan’s political rhetoric has become increasingly anti-Westernist, thus empowering the conservative religious social strata (Goodyear 2021).

The religious, cultural and political shift has been deemed by many authors as neo-Ottomanism, although neither Erdoğan nor Ahmet Davutoğlu—former foreign policy advisor, foreign minister, prime minister and intellectual who largely fathered this ideological international political platform—ever use the term, as they both consider it negatively charged and meant to give rise to negative connotations, ultimately used to blemish Turkey’s reputation and image (Yavuz 2020). Be that as it may, the term is being used extensively. It was coined by British journalist David Burchard as early as 1985 who defined it as “a consciousness of the imperial Ottoman past”, [...] “a more potent force in Turkey than Islam, as Turkey regains economic strength, it will be increasingly tempted to assert itself” (Yavuz 2020, p. 4). Although the task of defining neo-Ottomanism is not straightforward, Yavuz describes it as

“the manifestation of Turkey’s strong interest in its own history, but it is also a testament to the still bitterly contested issue of national identity. With the current wave of nostalgia, the Turks seek to ameliorate present difficulties with memories of a glorious heritage both real and imagined” (Yavuz 2020, p. xii).

In this context, Turkish national identity is subject to revision and heavily infused with Ottoman Islamic heritage on the one hand, while on the other, at an international political level, outreach to former Ottoman regions on the basis of cultural commonalities, as well as an appetite to take on the leadership of the Muslim world and presumably defend it from Western and generally non-Muslim imperialist affronts, is also detectable. It is actually worth noting that the former head of the *Diyanet*, Lütü Doğan, described Turkey to Hakan Yavuz as a wounded nation (Tr.: *yaralı millet*) whose core identity is Islam, which, for the healing process to ensue, requires the restoration of the Ottoman–Islamic identity (Yavuz 2003). Namely, Lütü Doğan held:

“For us, the Turkish Muslims, we were forced out of the Balkans, Caucasus, and Crimea and we were persecuted by the European powers. Not only were our

communities forced out of the Balkans, as is still happening in Bosnia today, but our alphabet and our beautiful language was wiped out. In a way, the entire post-Ottoman system of secularism, nationalism, and nation-state, including NATO membership, is an imposition by European Powers. We never had the chance to heal our polity and our historic wounds, and mourn for the world that we lost” (Yavuz 2020, p. 19).

The romanticisation of the Ottoman era is traceable in the public sphere, in the restoration of monuments, the apt naming of streets, buildings, schools, etc., the revival of the vocabulary of the time, the arts and crafts and generally the cultural heritage thereof, which has found footing with society. Further, the nostalgic gaze harks back to an idyllic past that preceded the presumed oppression and victimisation of the Turkish Muslim identity by the West and the Kemalist establishments alike, bestowing thus legitimacy to a Nationalist-Islamist ideological platform (Yavuz 2020) and ultimately to neo-Ottomanism. When one considers the discernible pattern, the neo-Ottoman narrative of the past identifies enemies and adversaries of the present and the future. Moreover, for the old wounds to heal and for the restoration of the glorious past, corresponding revisionist political strategies are dictated.

Part of the Turkish intelligentsia has been involved in this discourse as well, maintaining that top-down Westernisation ignored society’s Islamic cultural roots at the expense of political legitimacy, as society and state were dissociated. Instead of the genuine one, where Islam and Turkishness are inseparable, a hybrid, Western-infused artificial identity was imposed, with destructive effects on the collective culture and ethos. As a remedy, their “restorative nostalgia” aimed at the restoration of the old “home” based on nationalistic and religious constituent elements. However, Erdoğan’s neo-Ottomanism is intellectually rooted in the ideological synthesis of Islamism, Nationalism and Conservatism authored by Necip Fazıl in the framework of his Great Eastern Movement (Tr.: *Büyük Doğu Hareketi*) (Yavuz 2020). Fazıl (1904–1983), an Islamist, intellectual and anti-leftist, among others (Altun 2015; Yavuz 2020), had a significant contribution to the shaping and substantiation of an ideological schema that hosted nationalist Islamism, infused with resentment for the West, victim mentality and thereby revanchism. It is undoubtedly worth noting his utilitarian view of hatred as instrumental in fuelling political mobilisation, against the adherents of Westernisation and the European way of life no less (Yavuz 2020).

What is more, Erdoğan, together with the resentment for the West, the victimhood narrative and the revanchist attitude, shares this conceptualisation of passion-generating hatred as a mobilising force. His revanchist revisionism is twofold, domestic and international, particularly with reference to Turkey’s near-abroad aspirations. As regards domestic revanchism and anti-Westernism, it is worth taking note of the Islamist *Gerçek Hayat* magazine, which is allegedly closely associated with Erdoğan. In a 176-page-long special edition featured in its May 2020 issue, it targeted and directly accused the most prominent non-Muslim leaders in Turkey, the Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the Chief Rabbi and the former Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, of linkages to FETO, i.e., Fetullah Gülen’s movement, and of “masterminding the 2016 coup attempt” (Hoff 2021, online).

With reference to international political revisionist revanchism, Erdoğan has brought the Treaty of Lausanne into question, the foundational treaty of the Republic of Turkey, heavily criticising the allocation of territories under the existing international regime, referring to Aleppo (Syria), Mosul (Iraq) and the Aegean Islands (Greece), among others; he has openly challenged the status quo, hinting border changes in favour of Turkey (Yavuz 2020). His overtly Islamist and implicit anti-Christian rhetoric has taken aim at regions once belonging to the Ottoman Empire; in his own words,

“Those who think that we have erased from our hearts the land from which we withdrew in tears a hundred years ago are wrong. We say at every opportunity we have that Syria, Iraq, and other places in the geography [map] in our hearts are no different from our own homeland. We are struggling so that a foreign flag will not be waved anywhere where adhan [Islamic call to prayer in mosques] is recited. The things we have done so far [pale in comparison to the] even greater attempt and attacks [we are planning for] the coming days, inshallah” (Hoff 2021, online).

At the same time, while Imam Hatip schools are multiplying, secular schools are closing, as the graduates of the former are expected to demonstrate a pious moral fibre, loyalty and commitment to realise Turkey’s grandeur. It would not be out of place to consider the political situation as suggestive of a turn to Islamic-laden nationalism with clear revanchist and revisionist tendencies (Yavuz 2020). Within this framework, the AKP, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the helm, proceeded with the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

5. The Third Conquest

It was 10 July 2020 when the high administrative court declared the 1934 cabinet decision to convert Hagia Sophia to a museum null and void. This was followed by the jurisdictional transfer of its ownership from the Ministry of Culture to the Diyanet, i.e., the Presidency of Religious Affairs. And two weeks later, in a televised speech, Erdoğan drew parallels with the Ottoman past and projected its glories to the present and future by calling this decision “the second conquest of Istanbul” and deemed it a step towards the liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque (Hoff 2021). It would be useful to state the obvious here and explain that I am using the metaphor of the ‘Third Conquest’—Constantinople was conquered twice as stated earlier, by Crusaders in 1204 and Ottomans in 1453—as a convenience, to describe a highly symbolic decision that aims to insinuate conquest, in the context of a neo-Ottoman revisionist revanchist political doctrine. The conversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque in July 2020 is of high symbolic meaning. It is not just any church, considering its history. It has been the greatest church in Christendom and the “ultimate monument of the Byzantine Empire” for a millennium (Goodyear 2021, p. 52).

And because of its meaning and importance, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, being by definition a divisive act, sparked controversy. It was met with bemusement and disbelief by the Christian international community on the one hand and, on the other, with enthusiasm by Islamists (Jamaledine 2020; Goodyear 2021). The latter saw the reversal of the 24 November 1934 cabinet decree that designated Hagia Sophia a museum, turned into law by Kemal, as the undoing of oppressive secularism; not to mention that in their eyes it remedied the insult to the Prophet Muhammed whose prophecy had foretold the prevailing of Islam via the conquest of Constantinople and the conversion of Hagia Sophia (Yosmaoğlu 2021). It is no coincidence, for instance, that Islamist communities in Turkey hold annual commemorative events in Istanbul to pay tribute to their ancestors who triumphed over the West. In the same vein operates the annual re-enactment of the Conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Ottomans, signifying the victory over the West and the triumph of Islam (Yavuz 2020).

This is indicative of a romanticised Islam and of Ottoman nostalgia at a grassroots level as well, meaning that neo-Ottomanism is not simply imposed from the top down, but rather, that there is a bottom-up process that reinforces it at the same time. The Anatolia Youth Association ran a petition that called for the reconversion of Hagia Sophia to a mosque in 2014; they managed to collect approximately fifteen million signatures. The head of the Anatolia Youth Association argued that “*Ayasofya is a symbol for the Islamic world*

and the symbol of Istanbul's conquest" [...]. "Without it, the conquest is incomplete, [and] we have failed to honour Sultan Mehmet's trust" (Hoff 2021, online). Another similar initiative, indicative of simultaneous bottom-up processes, would be the prayer organised by an Islamist youth since 2014, on the anniversary of the conquest, with the slogan "unchain the Hagia Sophia" (Christofis 2023, p. 14).

For Erdoğan, in addition to satisfying the domestic audience, the reconversion was a calculated move, meant to symbolically indicate Turkey's Islamic hegemony beyond its borders as well, part and parcel with the revisionist, revanchist aspirations to render Turkey a regional power in the Middle East and beyond, while unifying the Sunni Islamic world under Turkey's leadership (Jamaledidine 2020). At the same time, the triumph over the Christian West is a constituent element of the greater neo-Ottoman ideology and narrative. In a celebration of Constantinople's conquest by Mehmed II, Erdoğan made sure to underline that *"the conquest means going beyond the walls that the West thought were impervious, [...]. The conquest means a 21year-old sultan bringing Byzantium to heel"* (Tavernise 2016; Yavuz 2020).

On 24 July 2020, the day of Hagia Sophia's reconversion, a monumental and highly symbolic celebration took place. In addition to Erdoğan's speech, Ali Erbaş, the head of the *Diyanet*, delivered a sermon titled 'Hagia Sophia: Sign of Conquest, Our Trust in the Fatih [Mehmet II 'The Conqueror']'. From the pulpit, ornamented with two green flags, with an Ottoman sword in hand, he reminisced about prophet Muhammad, who had foretold that *"one day, Constantine will be conquered; great is the commander who will conquer it and great are his soldiers"* (Hoff 2021, online). Further, the Islamist *Gerçek Hayat* magazine—which is owned by a pro-government media group—on the occasion of the reconversion, hosted it on the front page of its July issue as a main theme, while featuring the red Ottoman caliphate flag, urging the restoration of the caliphate in Arabic, Turkish and English: "Get together for caliphate. If not now, when? If not you, who?" (Hoff 2021, online). The rhetoric of conquest is repeated time and again in the public sphere, and it appears to be legitimised given that it is well received, and it is worth noting that it is carefully embellished with contours of justice and insinuations of religiously sanctioned just war. In Erdoğan's words, in a statement made in August 2020,

"our civilization is one of conquest [...]. In our civilization, conquest is not occupation or looting. It is establishing the dominance of the justice that Allah commanded in the conquered region [...]. First of all, our nation removed the oppression from the areas that it conquered. It established justice. This is why our civilization is one of conquest" (Christofis 2023, p. 14).

However, the reconversion and the symbolic third conquest, which redeemed both country and society in the sense of fulfilling a long-standing obligation to honour the Prophet's legacy, should not come as a surprise; it was not the first one, but rather, the last so far in a series of conversions. Hagia Sophia's synonymous churches in Iznik and Trabzon were reconverted to mosques in 2011 and 2013, respectively. Subsequently, the historically and culturally acclaimed Chora Monastery Church (Gr.: Μονή της Χώρας) was converted to Kariye Mosque in 2019. The reconversion of Hagia Sophia was merely the culmination of a cultural political programme (Goodyear 2021). Perhaps the conversions of other historical, cultural Orthodox Christian places of worship failed to capture the attention of the international community, yet the same cannot be said of Hagia Sophia as the news shocked the world. The United States Department of State expressed its disappointment, while then-President Joe Biden urged Erdoğan to reverse this decision; the twenty-seven foreign ministers of the EU condemned it; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) expressed their profound disappointment,

with Christians uniting for a global “day of mourning” while Hagia Sophia opened for prayers as a Mosque (Goodyear 2021).

6. Conclusions

Indeed, Hagia Sophia, still bearing its inaugural name, is a unique place of worship and cultural monument. Setting the Byzantine religious architectural paradigm, it co-shaped the corresponding cultural identity and gave rise to a diachronic heritage. Being universally admired across centuries, it is no wonder that it still draws significant attention beyond the domain of culture. Its conversions go hand in hand with the conquests and fate of Constantinople and later Istanbul: in 1204, it was converted to a Catholic cathedral, in 1453, to a mosque, and then, with the establishment of the Turkish state, to a museum, reflecting rather the entirety of its historical trajectory. However, its recent reconversion to a mosque has a significant cultural and political bearing.

The reconversion was not meant to meet spiritual needs by hosting prayers and sermons—surely, Istanbul has plenty of mosques for that, with plenty of outlets and opportunities for Muslims to practice their religion. My assessment is that it was a purely political decision, meant to stand metaphorically as *the third conquest of Constantinople*. Justified by prophecy fulfilment, it symbolically amends the damages of Westernisation and secularisation, while reinstating and legitimating Islamic Turkishness. Further, with identity politics at the epicentre, neo-Ottomanism, as a programme and ideology, portrays itself as inclusive of Sunni Muslims beyond the borders of what used to be Ottoman territories, reminisces past glories and seeks to justify and inspire future ones in the name of religion. Erdoğan, on the other hand, emerges as a victor who defies the West. Not only that, but he defeats it by injuring one of its fundamentals, i.e., Christianity, via retaking a symbolic bastion of the latter on the fault line between East and West. In doing so, Erdoğan seeks to be upheld as a neo-Ottoman leader who stands up to the Christian West, heals the wounds of identity crisis domestically and reclaims and reconstructs Turkishness anew, while symbolically consolidating his ambitious neo-Ottoman version of Turkey. Revanchism and revisionism need adversaries and enemies, as well as victories over them. In that sense, a symbolic conquest of such gravity meets those needs.

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