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# Hagia Sophia and the Demise of the Sacred

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*“As soon as there is a society, every usage is converted into a sign of itself.”*

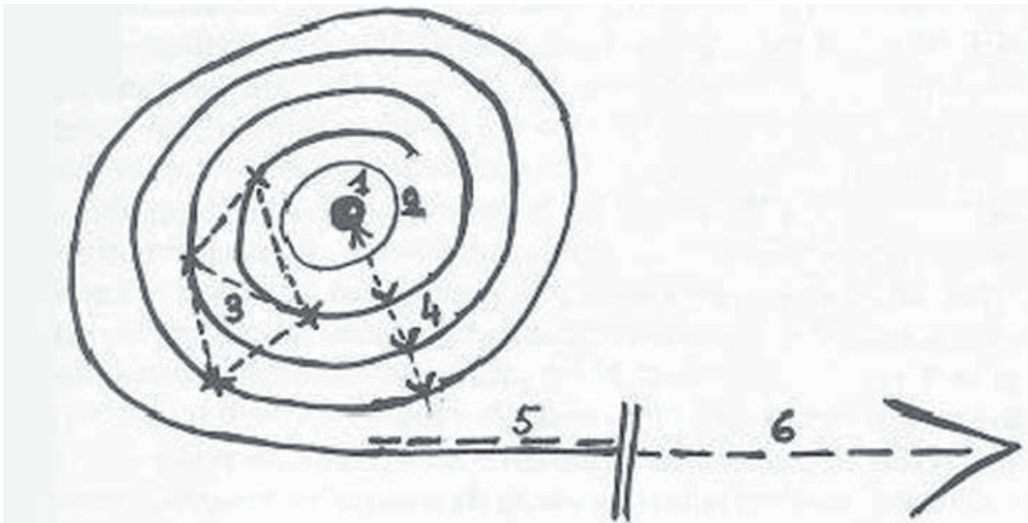
*(Barthes, 1968)*

## **The Sacred: A Question of Representation**

The sacred is the connection between the divine and the mortal, the eternal and the temporary, the transcendental and the immanent. The sacred takes place in this world sometimes as a materialized object, a piece of art, a designed temple, and sometimes as a person; in any case, however, its presence signifies a power originating from a source beyond our world. Through a narrowed perspective, the “sacred,” as a concept, can be defined by a set of symbolic relations, where each signifier represents the signified absolute. So the question of the sacred can be interpreted as one of representation. The etymology of the word “representation” provides us with clues about the ontological structure the concept of the sacred entails: “re-presenting” is presenting a substitute instead of the real.<sup>1</sup> When the real thing is not available to us, some other thing is provided to replace the thing in absence. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a semiotic

system forms a regime of sign, where every sign refers to another sign, generating a signifying chain, an infinitely circular spiral oriented toward the center of significance. The form comes from the signifier, while the signified re-imparts the signifier, produces more of it, and recharges it (Figure 1). In this semiotic system, there exists a form of expression and a form of content, which constitutes the "Temple." <sup>2</sup>

Through a historical interrogation of a temple, a post-structural reading of Hagia Sophia, this paper explores the reasons behind the demise of the sacred within the modern epistemological regimes. Hagia Sophia, the oldest and most prominently sacred monument of Istanbul, is an iconic symbol of the city. Over the course of the city's complex history, this monument went through several symbolic re-manifestations, which makes it a unique example for discussing the changing meanings of the "sacred" within the city's stratified socio-cultural structure. In the pre-modern era, Hagia Sophia as an architectural masterpiece was believed to be truly miraculous and the structure itself was accepted as a gift from God. It was the form of the content and the form of the expression, wherein every part of the "Temple" was believed to represent the signified absolute, God himself. The signified, that is, the creator or divinity, was being



(1) The Center or the Signifier; the faciality of the god or despot. (2) The Temple or Palace, with priests and bureaucrats. (3) The organization in circles and the sign referring to other signs on the same circle or on different circles. (4) The interpretive development of signifier into signified, which then reimparts signifier. (5) The expiatory animal; the blocking of the line of flight. (6) The scapegoat, or the negative sign of the line of flight.

**Figure 1**  
Regimes of signs (from Deleuze & Guattari, 2007).

comprehended through symbolic means and was perceived as the created or the signifier. The worldly object was coded with the sanctity and eventually the designed and created was decoded as the sacred one.<sup>3</sup>

This study offers parallel readings of the changing significance of Hagia Sophia within the transforming socio-political strata of the city by analyzing the changing perception of the sacred as represented in the architecture of this unique building.

## **Christianization**

Istanbul is an old city founded by the legendary Megarian King Byzas in the seventh century BC. It was captured by the Romans in 196 AD, declared as the capital of Eastern Rome by Constantine in 330 AD, and finally became the capital of Orthodox Byzantine until the Turkish conquest in the fifteenth century. The city remained as the Muslim capital until the end of the Ottoman Empire, when it lost its privileged status with the declaration of Ankara as the capital of the new Turkish Republic in 1923. Emperor Constantine moved the capital of Rome to Nova Roma, which would later be called Constantinople, and declared Christianity as the official religion of Eastern Rome. The capital was adorned by several churches to reinforce the religious power and authority of the state. Hagia Sophia was located in Istanbul on an acropolis, the first hill of the Historic Peninsula, where two other churches with the same name were built at the same spot. The first church, constructed during the reign of Constantinus II in 350 AD, was destroyed by the fire of 404 AD. The second church was erected by Theodosius; it was consecrated in 415 AD and destroyed over a century later in 532 AD. The construction of the third church, the current Hagia Sophia, begun immediately with the order of Emperor Justinian on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 532 AD, and was completed in five years, a relatively short period of time, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, 537 AD.<sup>4</sup> Two mathematical physicists, Anthemius of Tralles, who died in 534 AD, and Isidorus of Miletus were said to have been responsible for the design and construction of this sacred monument. The design of this new church was completely different from the former churches in its ambitious scale and remarkable grandeur (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup>

The church has a surface area of 4570 square meters with a middle nave of 75×70 meters. Some of the 107 columns supporting the structure are believed to have been brought from several sacred buildings of the ancient world, such as the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world, the Temple of Sun at Heliopolis, and other temples in Rome. The “fabled dome, which appeared to be suspended from heaven on a golden chain,” as described by Procopius, has a height of 55.60 meters and a diameter of 31–32 meters. The dome, which sits on four pendentives, does not make a perfect circle due to the several renovations that were carried out to repair the damages caused



**Figure 2**  
Exterior view of Hagia Sophia (Source: Author).

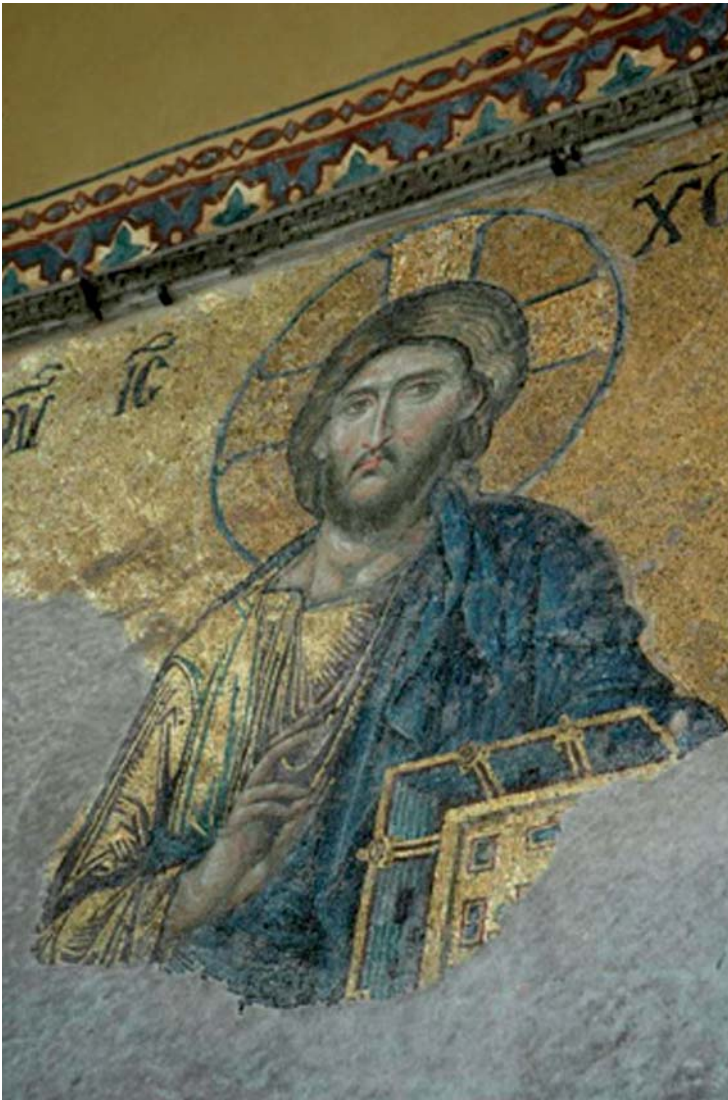
by several earthquakes. With its colossal size and incredible dome, supported by two half-domes and six smaller domes, the achievement of this architectural masterpiece was believed to be a miracle of God and was, therefore, widely regarded as the most sacred temple of Orthodox Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Procopius praised the new church in Book I of his *Edifices* as:<sup>7</sup>

So the church has become a spectacle of marvelous beauty, overwhelming to those who see it, but to those who know it by hearsay [is] altogether incredible ... For it proudly reveals its mass and harmony of its proportions, having neither any excess nor deficiency, since it is more pretentious than the buildings to which we are accustomed, and considerably more noble than buildings which are merely huge, and it abounds exceedingly in sunlight and the reflection of the sun's rays from the marble. Indeed one might say that its interior is not illuminated [from] without by the sun, but that its radiance comes into being [from] within it, such an abundance of light bathes this shrine.

Apart from its monumental mass, the interior of the basilica elongated in east-west axis was elaborately decorated. A variety of fine marbles, brought from all over the world adorned the interior



walls and piers. The finely carved column capitals are among the finest examples of Byzantine art and they are famous for their delicacy. The most prominent of all is the lavish use of gold tesserae, gold covered glass mosaic cubes.<sup>8</sup> Except for the non-figural narthex mosaics, remaining from the Justinian era, no earlier mosaics were saved from the Byzantine “iconoclasm.” In this unsettled era, all religious images in the city were destroyed in a movement that is explained as a reaction against the representation of the sacred through religious icons. All the figurative mosaics were added to the church after the iconoclastic period, which lasted from 726 to 843 AD. The golden mosaic panels of Hagia Sophia, depicting several religious scenes and historic instances



**Figure 3**

Christ from the Deesis panel of the south gallery of Hagia Sophia, late twelfth, early thirteenth centuries (Source: Author).

were among the finest examples of Byzantine religious art (Figure 3). Especially so are the mosaics depicting Christ and the Emperor Leo VI the Wise (886–912 AD), the Virgin and Christ Child (ninth century), Archangel Michael (tenth century), the Virgin between Justinian and Constantine, and several other panels at the galleries are of great spiritual and artistic significance. Hagia Sophia, as the magnum opus of Byzantine art and architecture, was accepted as the sacred icon of Orthodox Christianity and finally became the symbol of the shrinking Empire. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Byzantine Empire was besieged by the Ottomans and the Empire had to survive within the fortifications of Constantinople.

### Islamification

Conquering Constantinople was of vital importance for the Ottomans, and the fall of the city represents the sovereignty of Islam over the easternmost castle of Christianity. For the Ottomans, Hagia Sophia held special significance as it represented the “red apple,” the sacred nationalistic ideal of the Turks.<sup>9</sup> It is believed that with the siege of the city, the cardinal’s attempt of a Dictum of Union<sup>10</sup> was rejected by the Byzantine populace that cried: “Better the turban of the Turk than the Pope’s tiara.”<sup>11</sup> According to the historical records, upon concurring Constantinople on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 1453 AD, Sultan Mehmed II headed straight towards Hagia Sophia, admired the grandness and magnificence of the church, and prayed there. Mehmed the Conqueror commanded the immediate conversion of the church to a mosque and directed his soldiers not to damage the sacred mosaics and relics. The 1123 years of Christian history of the city came to an end with the conversion of Hagia Sophia. The Muslim Ottomans became deeply inspired by Hagia Sophia and celebrated its sacredness in several literary works. The poem of Koca Nişancı Celalzade Mustafa Paşa (d. 1569), comparing Hagia Sophia with heaven, provided a poetic frame for his contemporaries’ appreciation of the new architectural image of the sacred:<sup>12</sup>

*Melek görmeği dilersen yürü var hatır-ı şadi  
Ayasofya’nın içinde ko dursun ol dil-i zan*

(If you would like to see an angel, go to Hagia Sophia  
and leave your broken heart there)

*Mekani Cennetü’l-Me’va veya Firdevs-i sanidir  
Behişt olma mı ol cami melek olıcak üstadı*

(This place is the heaven, because the mosque was  
built by angels)

(...)

*Anın gibi dahi bir eyledi mahluk ol Halık  
Yedi kat gökler üstünde Ayasofiyiye’dir adı*



**Figure 4**

Interior view of Hagia Sophia (Source: Author).

(The divine creator God, seven floors above the ground, created a similar edifice named Hagia Sophia)

With the Islamification of the city, Hagia Sophia Mosque becomes one of the most important symbols of Muslim glory, symbolizing the victory of Islam over Christianity. After the immediate removal of the ambo, relics, thrones, altar, and icons, a wooden minaret was constructed and the east-west axis of the altar was tilted with the addition of a *mihrab* indicating the direction of Mecca. During Sultan Mehmed's reign, the temporary wooden minaret was replaced with a brick one. Later, a stone minaret was erected by Selim II in 1574 AD, and two other stone minarets were added by his son, Murat III, a year later. All three stone minarets were constructed by the chief



**Figure 5**

Fossati's depiction of Hagia Sophia as a mosque in the nineteenth century (Source: Cimok, 1996).



architect Sinan, who was also responsible for the restoration of the building. The Ottomans, apart from covering the figurative mosaics with white-wash plaster, appended several sacred elements of their own and adorned the mosque according to the Islamic tradition. The addition of several Islamic “icons,” such as *mihrab* and *minber*, which were oriented toward Mecca, the *levhas*, presenting the names of Allah, Mohammed, Abu Bekr, Omar, Othman, Ali, Hasan, and Hüseyin, and with the Islamic inscription on the inner surface of the dome, the Christian basilica was turned into one of the most sacred places of Islam (Figure 4). Apart from the conversion of the baptistery of the church into *türbe*, “funerary monuments” of Mustafa I and İbrahim, the addition of imperial *türbes* for the Sultans – Selim II, Murad III, and Mehmed III, and for their immediate families – shows the great symbolic significance the building and its sacred site held for the Ottoman royal family.<sup>13</sup>

The architecture of Hagia Sophia became the main inspiration for Ottoman architects, who tried to outdo its miraculously grand dome, but only to come near a thousand years after its construction through the works of the renowned Ottoman architect Sinan in the sixteenth century. The structural system of supporting the main dome with semi-domes was improved by the Ottoman architects and becomes a typical feature of Ottoman mosques (Figure 5). The large dome covering the whole space is believed to symbolize the unity of God as the Supreme Ruler of heaven and earth.

### **Secularization**

During the renovations undertaken by Swiss architects Gaspare and Giuseppe Fossati in 1847–49, the whitewash and plaster covering the figural mosaics were cleared. The mosaics, which were recorded by Fossati brothers and covered over again, must have generated a great interest in the Western academic circles. However, the Christian icons had to wait until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire before they reappear again.

Right after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, adopting a strict secular and nationalistic ideology. The new republic, inspired by Western ideals, repudiated the Ottoman heritage and strove to sever the organic relation between religion and official and social institutions. The laicism of modern Turkey was secured with a constitutional law that isolated religion from the state, while allowing the state to intervene in religious matters. While this paradox was criticized by liberal groups, conservative parties blamed the secular state for promoting heathenism and enforcing irreligion.<sup>14</sup> In this new milieu, a socio-political separation took place among the enlightened elites, who admired Atatürk and his principles, and the conservative groups, who considered the traditional Ottoman heritage as religious and sacred. The polarization between the *Kemalist*/Westernist and the *Islamist*/Traditionalist populations widened the social and intellectual gap within the society.<sup>15</sup>

This socio-political tension and its ensuing debates can be traced in the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum. In 1932, members of the Byzantine Institute, Thomas Whittemore and his colleagues, started uncovering and restoring the mosaics of Hagia Sophia. In 1934, with a direct order from the cabinet and the approval of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the mosque of Hagia Sophia was opened as a museum. The official memorandum states that “The conversion of Hagia Sophia, as an architectural masterpiece, to a museum would please the Eastern world and will introduce a new scientific institution to the civilized world.”<sup>16</sup> The decision was certainly a political one, which is still been discussed by various groups. Today, while some circles applaud this decision as an important step in the modernization of Turkey, other parties believe that the museumification was dictated by the Western

imperialist forces, representing the first step towards the conversion of Hagia Sophia back into a church (Figure 5).<sup>17</sup> Arif Nihat Asya's poetry demonstrates the reaction against the museumed Hagia Sophia:<sup>18</sup>

*Beş vakit, loşluğunda saf saftık;* (We used to pray five times in your shadowy light;)  
*Davetin vardı dün ezanlarda...* (Yesterday you were calling us for prayer...)  
*Seni, ey mabedim, utansınlar* (They must be embarrassed, my sanctuary;)  
*Kapayanlar da; açmayanlar da!* (For closing you down and not opening up)

**Figure 5**  
Alerting headlines on Turkish newspapers: "Europe aims at converting Hagia Sophia into a church!" (Source: Kandemir, 2004).



## The Sacred in a Plurality of Representational Systems

The mosaic iconography of the church exemplifies the perception of the sacred and the problem of representation. For Orthodox Christians the icons did not signify God, but they were seen as manifestations of God himself. For Deleuze and Guatari, the sacred is the “faciality” of God.<sup>19</sup> It is known that some mosaics were eaten by the believers with the ambition for unification with the God. Iconoclasm was a reaction against such an extreme understanding of the representation of the sacred. The figural icons were destroyed to prevent the problem of representation. Obviously, the destruction of the signifier was not the answer to this dilemma; a century later Byzantines continued creating much refined and even more realistic icons. The holy sanctuary of Hagia Sophia represented literally and symbolically the very being of Orthodox Christianity by the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The conquest of Istanbul not only changed the socio-political structure of the city; but also transformed the semiotic system of the ‘sayable’ and the ‘visible’.<sup>20</sup> The new power structure that was directing its authority towards the most “sacred” edifice, was more than willing to demonstrate his sovereignty through representation. Lines of flight break the established regimes of signs; in other words, de-territorialize the system of representations and re-territorialize them by loading a new set of meanings to the form.<sup>21</sup> The form was stripped off of its existing meanings and loaded with a new set of symbolic values. In Deleuzian terms, the signifier was overcoded to represent the new signified, which happened to be the glory of Islam.

Apart from being a functional necessity, architecture is a semiotic system, a representational structure. Umberto Eco argues that architectural forms, as tools of mass communication, signify both primary functions, which directly denote the function or the *utilitas* of the building, and have secondary functions that connote the ideology of the power structure. However, according to Eco, the primary functions of buildings may vary and their secondary functions could be open to unforeseen future codes.<sup>22</sup> A building can adopt different functions throughout its physical life, and, more importantly, the symbolic message it conveys can be open to alternative and even contrasting readings. So the initial representative intention is subject to change due to transforming political, social, or cultural contexts. In this respect, the foundation of the Turkish Republic has radically transformed the socio-political context. The new power structure of the modern state is the abstract machine that regulates the regimes of signs and overcodes them. The conversion of the mosque into a museum in 1935 was the victory of the secular ideology against the sacred. The Byzantine mosaics were uncovered and displayed side by side with the Islamic calligraphy. The sacred was fragmented into pieces, where each piece becomes an object of display for

the “modern” people of the secular world. The 1400-year-old monument was converted into a tourist icon.

The shift of the historical formation in the twentieth century, however, was different from the one that took place in the fifteenth century. An important power vector, “modernity,” continuously transforms the historical formation and cyclically de-territorializes and re-territorializes the system. In other words, modernity broke the chain of signifying relations and shifted the regime of signs to a different plane, to the plane of immanence. Lines of flight de-territorialized the long established rules of representation. In the pre-modern era, the signifier was clearly an artificial place-maker for the signified. With the epistemological-shift of modernity, the representation does not take the place of reality anymore, so the sacred signifier does not represent the absolute signified any longer. The sacred connection between the divine and the mortal was broken and the transcendental has landed in the plane of immanence. Deleuze and Guattari distinguished the paranoid, signifying, despotic regime of signs from passionate or subjective, post-signifying, authoritarian regime. In the post-signifying regime, “a sign or packet of signs detaches from the irradiating circular network and sets to work on its own account.”<sup>23</sup> The dispersion of the circular regime refers to the absence of the transcendental center and the fragmentation of the signified, which used to be located at the core of the system.

During the course of its history, the primary function of Hagia Sophia as a temple has changed, and so did its secondary functions. Hagia Sophia still denotes sacred meanings, but the transcendental unity of the representation was lost. The continuous and absolute relationship between the signifier and the signified was dispersed. The temple, as the content of form, now conveys diverse messages to different receptors. Today, Hagia Sophia indicates several diverse and even conflicting messages to different segments of the society. For various receptive groups, it may represent the legacy of the Ottomans, the glory of Byzantine art and architecture, a touristic attraction, or the cultural mosaic of Istanbul. The two mainstream opposing representations are the “sacred” heritage of secular *Kemalist* enlightenment and the “sacred” nostalgia towards the glorious Ottoman past. The case in Turkey exemplifies Wuthnow’s theory of modernization, according to which the religion’s capacity to influence the public realm weakens but there remain periods of reaction during which religiously inspired backlash movements appear.<sup>24</sup> The conservative groups, who believe that European powers aim at converting Hagia Sophia back into a church, hope that eventually the monument will be converted into a mosque. For this group, the building itself does not represent the sacred anymore; however, it represents the sacred memory of the Ottoman heritage. With romantic tendencies, the conservative group try to bridge the



inevitable separation between the past and the present. They hope to cure the malady of modernity, the sense of discontinuity and the feeling of disunity. On the other hand, for the secularist groups, who acclaim the museumification of the monument, the idea of reopening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque represents an obscurantist thread, a direct opposition towards *Kemalist* ideals.

What needs to be addressed here, however, is not what the form actually represents, but the fact that the semiotic chain was broken into pieces. According to Peter L. Berger, religious symbolic universes and secular symbolic universes may perform much the same functions and compete with each other for adherents. In the modern society, the sacred and non-sacred realities are constructed collectively with symbols, but the very same symbol may be interpreted differently in a separate context, challenging the transcendental assumptions and norms.<sup>25</sup> As emphasized by Marshall Berman, in the maelstrom of continuous disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish, the search for unity is meaningless, because there is only one kind of unity, the unity of disunity.<sup>26</sup> In the modern world, “everything is pregnant with its contrary,” the signified does not re-impart the signifier, re-produce more of it, and recharge it anymore; but in a reverse manner, the signifier exposes and explodes the signified and produces more of it. In other words, a single form might indicate endless number of meanings, diminishing the ultimate power of representations. The centrality of the signified is thus dispersed in the infinite plane of coding, decoding, and recoding.

In conclusion, with the epistemological shift of modernity, the paradigm of the sacred lost its transcendental authority due to the lack of unity and coherence of the semiotic regime. There is no more an absolute center within which power is located and towards which all signifiers point, but power accumulates around several points of concentration. It is not true that there are no longer as powerful semiotic tools as the ancient times, but on the contrary there is an abundance of both the signifiers and the signifieds in modern times. It is not the duality but the plurality of the representational system that comprises the real curse for the sacred.

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