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Massive affront to Christianity as Turkish high court rules Hagia Sophia can be reconverted into Muslim mosque



Today will be remembered as an ominous day for Christianity, especially for Orthodoxy and its hundreds of millions of faithful around the world, as Turkey's highest administrative court issued a ruling that paves the way for the Erdogan administration to reconvert the iconic Hagia Sophia - the greatest of all basilicas in eastern Christendom - back into a Muslim mosque.

Turkey's Council of State threw its weight behind a petition brought by an Islamist group and annulled a landmark 1934 cabinet decision, which transformed the 6th century cathedral-turned mosque into a museum. That decision carried the signature of modern Turkey's founder, Kemal Ataturk.

Nearly nine decades later, the court ruling allows the Islamist-leaning Erdogan government to end the Hagia Sophia's status as Turkey's most visited museum, possibly also threatening its designation as a prominent UNESCO World Heritage site.

Dozens of people who awaited the Turkish court's ruling outside the Hagia Sophia jubilantly chanted the Muslim declaration "Allah is great", when the news emerged.

The decision was in line with authoritarian Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's calls to turn the hugely symbolic world heritage site into a Muslim place of worship, despite widespread international opposition from Orthodox Church primates, the heads of other faiths, international leaders and most of the world's global institutions.

Earlier in the day, the United Nations' cultural agency, the highly respected UNESCO, again warned Turkey against converting the Hagia Sophia, the seat of Orthodoxy for nearly a millennium, into a mosque — urging dialogue before any decision is taken.

An article published this week in the highly regarded "Economist", notes that "... To the delight of his Islamist and nationalist base, Mr. Erdogan seems determined to go ahead with the conversion. Last year, the Turkish leader said it was a "very big mistake" to use the building as a museum. Last month, he suggested Muslim prayers could be held inside the Hagia Sophia on July 15th, the fourth anniversary of a failed coup against him. "

On his part, Turkish Justice Minister Abdul-Hamit Gul had referred to a so-called "legal need" for the Hagia Sophia to again function as a Muslim place of worship, while claiming that its historical and cultural value as a monument would be preserved.

Conversely, as the debate over the fate of the UNESCO World Heritage site raged, Turkish parliament deputy Hüda Kaya said the monument should again become a Christian church.