

Converted Christian and Islamic Architecture: A Path to Understanding

Christianity and Islam have long been at odds, and in modern times, much of their fear for each other stems from terrorism and the association or non-association with certain religious groups to such violent behavior. Religious fundamentalism (the idea that your religion is the right, and all others are wrong) also plays a role in how many Muslims and Christians feel about each other. However, when you go back in time to look at the origins of the Islamic and Christian faiths, they have similar beginnings and questions about life (Grupico, 1). These similarities are often mirrored in the shared elements of each religion's architectural style, as well as in the conversion of churches to mosques or vice versa, which is a pattern that can be found dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Buildings such as the Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Mosque at Trilye, as well as more modern examples such as a church-turned-mosque in Germany, exemplify this layering of religions. By looking at these converted pieces of architecture, and the conversation—both negative and positive—surrounding their religious changes, it becomes clear that it is possible for Islam and Christianity to peacefully coexist.

Architectural similarities in Islamic and Christian style are apparent in mosques and churches, and make a good model for peace between the two religions. One of these similarities is the Islamic mihrab niche and the Christian altar. Both structures are at the east end of the building and serve the same purpose: to direct the congregation's attention and prayer. The dome is another similarity in many spaces for both religions, and according to Christina Grupico, "the cultural interchange between Christian and Islamic design" led to this, as well as many of the parallels seen in the religions themselves (Grupico 2). There are some styles of architecture, however, that would not be good candidates for conversion to the other religion. The Latin Cross ground plan for churches, for example, would not translate well to a mosque because the shape is

a foundational aspect of Christianity: the crucifixion of Christ. However, all the three of buildings used as examples in this essay are easily flexible between both Christian and Islamic spaces.

To understand the relationship between Christianity to Islam in our first example, the Hagia Sophia, the history of the building must first be explored. According to Richard Cavendish in an article published in *History Today*, the original Hagia Sophia, or “The Holy Church of Wisdom,” was built under the rule of Constantine in the fourth century (Cavendish). Constantine was the first Caesar of the Roman Empire to legalize Christianity and he built the Hagia Sophia as a Christian space. This huge building was rebuilt by Justinian after burning to the ground and still stands today in modern day Constantinople or Istanbul, Turkey. The Hagia Sophia’s direct connection to Islam began in 1452 when the Ottoman Turks took over Constantinople. They removed the east facing Christian altar and put in its place a mihrab that faced Mecca (which also pointed east), and converted the church into a mosque (Cavendish). According to the Hagia Sophia’s official website, the building’s final major change occurred in 1935, when it became a museum that was open to all (“History”).

From its original use as a church, then a mosque, to now existing as a museum, the Hagia Sophia has always been a point of pilgrimage; it brings people of all origins and faiths together. Almost 3.5 million people from around the world visited the building in 2015, and it is Turkey's biggest tourist attraction (Hagia Sophia Museum Statistics). Although the Hagia Sophia is a physical place of connection, it also weaves people and their faiths together through the subtlety of its religious history. When the Ottomans made the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, they covered or destroyed many of its Christian elements, including any depictions of Jesus, saints, angels, and any scenes from the Bible. This destruction is because any image of Allah or the Prophet

Mohammed is forbidden in Islam. However, when it became a museum, the Christian decorations and personages that had been covered in plaster were restored, and the Islamic pieces of the building, including its minarets and Arabic lettering, remained. These elements from both religions make the Hagia Sophia a building for people of Islam and Christianity, and it can be seen as an example of religious peace; if a building can be united rather than pulled apart by differences in faiths, than so can people.

Another building that was built as a church and converted into a mosque is the Byzantine Mosque at Trilye. It was constructed in the eighth century, and according to an article titled “The Byzantine Mosque at Trilye: A Processual Analysis of Dominance, Sharing, Transformation and Tolerance,” what was originally the Church of St. Stephen became a mosque in the sixteenth century (Hayden, et al. 7). The architecture of this building, like the Hagia Sophia and the modern mosque in Germany, lends itself to both the Christian and Islamic design of sacred space. When the Byzantine Mosque at Trilye was converted, a minaret was built (Hayden, et al. 12). Very little research has been done on this building, so it is unclear whether any Christian elements remained when it was converted (as is the case with the Hagia Sophia). Interestingly, according to Robert Hayden, the mosque was converted back into a church from 1920 to 1922 (Hayden, et al. 2). These shifts from Christianity to Islam, as with the Hagia Sophia, display how the architecture of these buildings easily allow for both religions, which again can be used as a model for each faith’s followers to find acceptance in one another.

Although these buildings are places of religious coexistence today, and can now be looked at as examples of overcoming the past, violence is part of both of these building’s history, and cannot be washed over or forgotten. According to Robert Hayden, the Byzantine Mosque at Trilye underwent religious conversion after a change in dominant religious populations in the

area, which is also true of the Hagia Sophia (Hayden et al. 7). However, these circumstances were not peaceful or willful. The Hagia Sophia was converted to a mosque after the siege of Constantinople, which took place in 1453 lasted 55 days. An observer of the battle, Nicolo Barbaro, declares that “blood flowed in the city like rainwater in the gutters after a sudden storm” (qtd in DRM_Peter). The siege’s death toll of either side is unknown, but Barbaro’s recounting tells of a violent and bloody battle. However, as historian Fergus Bordewich writes, the Ottomans did not destroy many of the Christian images in the Hagia Sophia when they made it into a mosque, but plastered over them, even leaving mosaics of the Mother Mary and angels visible because they believed them to be protectors of the city (Bordewich). They even kept the name of the building, simply changing the spelling to Turkish, so that it became *Ayasofya*.

The events leading up to Byzantine Mosque at Trilye’s conversion were not as bloody as the Hagia Sophia’s, but they were certainly not willful on the part of the people. This building’s religious transformation occurred after a literal population exchange at the mutual signing of the Lausanne Peace Treaty in 1923, which entailed that “a compulsory exchange of Turkish nationals of the Greek Orthodox religion established in Turkish territory, and of Greek nationals of the Moslem religion established in Greek territory” was to take place (Lausanne Peace Treaty VI). While this population exchange was not physically violent, the peace treaty was forced upon the people by their governments, which itself was a kind of brutality.

The religious exchange of the Hagia Sophia and the Byzantine Mosque at Trilye were violent, but the Capernaum Church in Germany which, according to Jesse Coburn, was in the process of becoming a mosque in 2015, gives us an example of a peaceful religious transition (Coburn). It is interesting to examine this present-day example of religious overlap, because with the advent of social media and modern communication, the added layer of opinions and

conversations, which were previously undocumented, are available for consideration. In a New York Times article, Coburn explains that when Daniel Abdin bought the Capernaum Church to convert into a mosque for his growing congregation, the initial reaction of the predominantly Protestant community was fear that Germany's "so-called Islamization" was seeping into their town (Coburn). But, after an anti-Muslim protest outside the mosque was unsuccessful, and with the passing of time as the mosque's neighbors became used to the change, people began "withholding their judgement" (Coburn). While this sentiment is not one of full acceptance, it is more open minded. The main point of resistance with this mosque, it seems, was fear of the new and unknown. This example makes clear that if people of different religions could understand -- or at least try to learn about -- each other, religious coexistence could be learned.

The architectural similarities and duality in religious history in the Hagia Sophia, the Byzantine Mosque at Trilye, and the new mosque in Germany effectively model what is possible for Christians and Muslims: understanding and acceptance of all people. In modern times, the idea and need to coexist is furthered by the growing number of interfaith chapels. All across the world, in airports, designated buildings, and universities, including Goucher College, spaces that allow for the worship of all religions are being built and, more importantly, celebrated. In a time when hate often seems more prevalent than love and understanding, we must look to these modern buildings that welcome all, as well as to the past at converted buildings and their religious layers, as proof that we can live together in peace.

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