

## Hagia Sophia: controversy over the call to prayer



Photo: Dennis Jarvis

**13 July 2016**

**During this year’s Muslim festival of Ramadan, the Turkish ministry of religious affairs has permitted the call to prayer by a muezzin and the reciting of the Quran, the holy book of Islam, within the historically Christian site of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.**

A UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985, the 6<sup>th</sup>-century church of Hagia Sophia (Greek for “Holy Wisdom”) was one of the great Christian cathedrals and seat of the Patriarch of Constantinople from 537 A.D. With the Ottoman conquest of 1453, the building was converted to a mosque and served as such until 1935.

Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Republic of Turkey, saw the monument as a shared location of artistic and historical importance. He had Hagia Sophia transformed into a museum.

Permission for the muezzin's call to prayer on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July rekindled a controversy over the use of this historic building, according to reports from the region. Formal complaints have been issued by the Greek government, and these have been met by responses from the Turkish side.

Commenting on this month's developments, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has stated in a recent sermon that "we respect the greatest feast of Islam. We respect their faith but we ask that they also respect our faith and the worship places of our ancestors."

Such respect should be reciprocal, he said, "for monuments such as Hagia Sophia, which through the centuries has marked not only the architecture of the Christian church but also the history and the self-identity of an entire people: our people."

Patriarch Bartholomew concluded, "A country like Turkey should respect and honour this heritage and should not offend its citizens – as tiny a minority as we may be – living in this country."

The Turkish historian İlber Ortaylı, writing for the daily newspaper Hürriyet, observes that even human respiration by crowds of worshippers, or tourists, becomes a threat to an ancient structure requiring continual restoration. He recommends that Hagia Sophia retain its function as a museum and be open to the public on only a limited number of days.

Ortaylı advises, "Protection of a monument constituting a cultural heritage does not accord with mere tourism or public display. Respect is required for the long journey of humanity's cultural adventure."