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## HAGIA SOPHIA: HOLY WISDOM IS FEMININE WISDOM

By Zilka Spahić Šiljak

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Reading reflections, comments, critiques, and arguments for and against turning Hagia Sophia (Turkish: *Ayasofya*) into a mosque, I asked myself: where are the sacredness and wisdom in this act?. The very name of this monumental building in Greek is *sophia* [*Σοφία*]. *Σοφία* means wisdom, but not any kind of wisdom: it is holy wisdom, divine wisdom, that is, the power to confirm the truth with wise arguments that we intuitively reached with *gnosis*—a deep knowledge of the essence of things. In Gnostic traditions, it is referred to as sacred knowledge, revelation, and ultimately the soul of the world in its feminine aspect. Although Gnosticism is linked to early Christianity, it is older, and as Gnostic scholars like to say, it is much more than religion: it is a way of life and a way of being.

The concept of *sophia* is found in all Eastern religious traditions. In Hinduism, it is *shakti* (sanskrit: personification of female wisdom), in Buddhism, it is the compassionate *bodhisattva*, in Christianity, it is Mother Mary *theotokos*, while in Jungian psychology, *sophia* is defined as the unifying power of masculine and feminine archetypes (*animus* and *anima*), as well as of the lower self with the higher spiritual self, *gnosis*. The key characteristic of *sophia* in Gnosticism is that it is able to grasp the paradox that two different views can be both true.

If *sophia* is holy wisdom, creativity, intelligence, divine, inspiration and the soul of the world, how can one understand the act of turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque as an act of wisdom? How can it be wise to make a gesture that sticks out like a sore thumb against the

background of Turkey's secular state in the eyes of neighboring countries, especially as some Christians feel like the historical context of what was once their church is being erased? How can something that is someone else's *haqq* (right) be sacred if it is treated as a conquest? The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) guaranteed the lives, honor, property and churches of Christians in his letter to the monks of the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai. His gesture should be a model to Muslims and guidance for navigating these types of situations until the end of times. The letter ends with the key message:

No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries. No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims' houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God's covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them... Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants. No one of the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world). (<http://www.cyberistan.org/islamic/charter1.html>)

The spirit of this letter rests in the qur'anic message that requires Muslims to communicate with Christians and Jews only kindly:

And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless it be such of them as are bent on evildoing—and say: “We believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you: for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves.” (Asad, Muhammad. *The Message of the Qur'an*, 29:46)

The magnificent Hagia Sophia, built by the Emperor Justinian in the early 6th century, and used as a mosque between 1453 (the year of the Ottoman conquest) and 1934, when it was turned into a museum, only to be officially returned to mosque status by the current Turkish government in 2020, is not the first holy place to have experienced such a fate. In conquering certain territories, Muslims and Christians have both altered the purpose of churches and mosques. It would take us a long time to list such cases throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa, even if we only considered the largest ones, but that is not the intention of this short text.

Arguments that can be heard these days among Muslims go something like: “Yes, they (Christians) also took away Alhambra and they demolished mosques in the Balkans, so now, for example, there is only one mosque in Belgrade, or they demolished hundreds of mosques during the last war (1992-1995) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” Such arguments cannot be used as an excuse for polarization, isolation, and divisive policies. If we are constantly moving within the circle of violence, appropriation and domination, we will never be able to reach Holy

Wisdom and we will never be able to cleanse our memories and history of the time spent in said circle and the resulting resentment.

In my attempt to understand the paradox of one building with the symbolic name of Holy Wisdom (*Hagia Sophia*) being appropriated and claimed by all (a subset of Muslims perceives it as their legacy (*waqf* of the Sultan Fatih) and rejoices at the return of its status to the mosque, Christians feel provoked because the church that was once taken away from them has become a mosque again, and secularists understand this act as an attack on the very foundations of secular order), reminded me of a time three women demonstrated the concept of Holy Wisdom.

Ten years ago, I met three female leaders of their respective religious communities who taught me how Holy Wisdom is reflected in practice. I first met Rabbi Miriam Hamrell in Novi Sad, Serbia, when she was a guest speaker in the synagogue at a seminar on Jewish ethics. I went to the synagogue interested in meeting a woman who is a rabbi. I knew that back in 1972, when Sally Priestand was ordained as the first female rabbi, that such a practice existed in the Reform Jewish communities in America, but this was the first time I had an opportunity to meet one of these women. Later during my stay in America, I had the opportunity to visit her synagogue and see the Holy Wisdom demonstrated in the feminine way.

One Saturday in Los Angeles, I attended the Sabbath prayer at the Ahavat Torah synagogue led by Rabbi Miriam. As I sat and enjoyed the prayer and the heavenly singing of her *cantor* (similar to a *muezzin* in the Islamic tradition), who was a professional opera singer, someone patted me on the shoulder and said “*Salaam alaykum*” (peace be upon you). Pleasantly surprised, I turned to see a Muslim woman with a hijab on her head whispering to me: “I come here often to enjoy this wonderful prayer.” When the prayer was over, lunch followed, dominated by large pots of Hungarian traditional goulash soup and stew. Rabbi Miriam very often prepares this food on Saturday for her congregation. She explained to me that her parents had been expelled from Hungary during the Holocaust and that she had learned to cook Hungarian dishes from them. With her sermons and delicious stew, Miriam inspires and feeds her congregants in the synagogue. “When the heart and soul are filled, the stomach should also be fed,” Miriam explained to me smiling.

She waved her hand and invited two women to join us: one was the leader of a Naqshbandi Sufi community, and the other was the pastor of a nearby Protestant church. Miriam said, “My dear Zilka, three of us together lead this house of God.” I stared at her in astonishment and before I could say anything, Miriam went on to explain that her community is small and that they could not afford to buy or rent a building in Los Angeles on their own

because real estate is too expensive, so she made an agreement with the women standing next to us that they would jointly rent a building and manage it as follows: on Fridays, it would be a mosque, on Saturdays, it would be a synagogue, and on Sundays, it would be a church. During the rest of the week, it would be used for different educational programs by all three communities. She also clarified that the stage and prayer space are constructed so they could be rearranged easily; this way each community can set up its own scenography and accompanying content as required by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim rituals and prayers.

This, and similar examples of small religious communities that have united for economic reasons and then discovered other benefits of such arrangements, such as learning about other religious traditions, opening dialogue, joint educational and humanitarian actions and nurturing neighborly and friendly ties within local communities, could be a model of Holy Wisdom to address the issues of disenfranchisement and isolation that are prevalent in the modern-day social context.

The three women managed to create a multi-religious model of synagogue-church-mosque that create a specific synergy of unity in diversity. They can teach us the Holy Wisdom of communion and dialogue; they show us that when we are ready to open our hearts to each other, we can open the cosmic doors that lead us to Grace and Light.

Since this was accomplished by three women, I wonder if the feminine path towards Holy Wisdom could be a model for Hagia Sophia and thus resolve this paradox: could it be a mosque on Fridays, a synagogue on Saturdays, a church on Sundays, and a museum during the week?

Although I am not a proponent of gender essentialism, because women can be warmongers too, I think that the feminine aspect of Holy Wisdom could be a solution for Hagia Sophia, but also for other buildings that conquerors in different parts of the world have turned into objects of their vanity, egocentrism, or national pride—all things we should not turn into idols that take precedence over our humanity, tolerance, and communities.