The Transformation of Sacred Spaces: Examining the Consequences of Forced Religious Conversions on Heritage Sites

Ehsan Kandil

Phd Student in Communication, Educational, and Humanities School, Universitat Internacional De Catalunya, Spain

ABSTRACT

This study examines the repercussions of forced religious conversions on heritage sites, with a focus on the transformation of Hagia Sophia and the Shah Ramzan Mahi Savar Shrine. Utilizing secondary data analysis and literature review, the research investigates the effects of such conversions on religious harmony and tensions.The conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020 and the change of the Shah Ramzan Mahi Savar Shrine into a Hindu temple in 1990 are analyzed as case studies to underline the intricate complexities and outcomes of altering the function and ownership of religious sites. The findings suggest that these conversions have marginalized original religious groups, disrupted spiritual harmony, caused emotional distress, and fostered societal unrest, thereby impeding interfaith dialogue and collaboration. The study advocates for the protection of religious heritage sites, the promotion of interfaith dialogue, and the cultivation of mutual respect among diverse religious communities to counteract division and discrimination and advance peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Religious Heritage - Religious Intolerance- Forceful Conversion- Hagia Sophia- Shah Ramzan Mahi Savar Shrine - Interfaith Harmony

INTRODUCTION

Religious heritage sites, deeply intertwined with a community's cultural and spiritual identity, embody the history, art, and beliefs of a group of people, serving as a focal point for their faith and communal identity (Tamma & Sartori, 2017). Throughout history, these sites have often confronted the threat of forceful conversion (De-Caro, 2017), a process involving the alteration of a site's purpose, function, or ownership with religious significance, typically driven by political ideologies, conflicts, or religious intolerance (Hayden, 2002).

Since ancient times, believers have taken upon themselves the responsibility of exporting their religions to other communities via immigration, trade, and even war. This sometimes resulted in acts of cultural cleansing (De-Caro, 2017).

Countless examples could be seen at all times and everywhere, such as the Christianization of pagan temples, the Muslim transformation of churches like Saint Nicholas's (Saint Sophia) in Famagusta, Northern Cyprus, to the Lala Mustafa Pasha Mosque and Philippe church in Algeria, which turned into the Ketchaoua mosque, the Great Mosque of Córdoba, which has become the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba (Albrifkany, 2016), and the conversion of Angkor's Hindu temples to Buddhism (Harris, 2019). The previous examples and many others are based on one principle: "Your ruler will give you his religion" (De-Caro, 2017).

Anthropological research has shown that the relationship between religion and politics is complex, especially when examined across human history. Throughout history, religious and political leaders have cooperated, opposed one another, and attempted to control each other, driven by a range of motives, from noble to base (Firth, 1981).

The consequences of forceful conversion on religious heritage sites can lead to the marginalization of the original religious group, resulting in the erosion of religious harmony. Moreover, the desecration of these sacred spaces can induce emotional distress and resentment, heightening existing tensions(Karlström,2013). Such impacts extend beyond the immediate community, fostering intolerance, discrimination, and social unrest, thereby hindering interfaith dialogue and cooperationand impeding efforts to promote peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, the loss of these heritage sites can have significant implications for preserving cultural and historical heritage, diminishing the richness and diversity of religious traditions (Hayden, 2002).

This study will investigate the effects of forcibly converting religious heritage sites. It will look at two examples - the Hagia Sophia museum and the Indian shrine of Shah Ramzan Mahi Savar - to understand the consequences of these conversions. The goal is to demonstrate how protecting religious heritage is crucial for promoting interfaith harmony and understanding.

METHODS

This study primarily depends on conducting secondary data analysis to explore the impact of forced conversion on religious heritage sites and its implications for religious harmony and tensions. This paper reviews existing literature, academic sources, and international news to develop a theoretical framework for the case studies. The collected data is meticulously organized to meet the study's objectives.

The data analysis encompasses two main methodologies:

Summarization: The research team synthesizes key findings from secondary sources to understand the ramifications of forced conversions on religious heritage sites.

Contextual analysis: Providing specific examples, this study delves into communal responses and the repercussions of violating religious heritage sites, offering a deeper exploration of the subject matter.
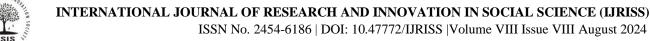
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Transformation of Hagia Sophia into a Mosque

Perhaps the most recent case of taking over religious heritage sites is the transformation of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque. The Hagia Sophia museum showed how different religions can live together in peace. In 2019, it was visited by about 3.7 million people, making it the most popular museum in Turkey (The Editorial Board, 2020).

The site was designated a world heritage property among the "Historic Areas of Istanbul" in 1985 (Causevic, 2020). It was originally the largest church in the Byzantine Empire, built by Justinian I in 537 A.D., and then converted into a mosque in 1453 with the Ottoman invasion of Constantinople (Wegner, 2004). Atatürk, Turkey's first president, turned the mosque into a museum in 1935 to symbolize the new secular Republic of Turkey (Daily Sabah, 2021).

The Turkish court decision on July 10, 2020, later signed by Turkish President Erdogan to reopen the Hagia Sophia as a mosque for prayer and devotion, was seen as a step towards harming interfaith harmony and intercultural relations (Burhani, 2020).

The implications of the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque were varied. Many Muslims around the world thought that turning the Hagia Sophia into a mosque was a win for the Muslim world over the Christian West (Burhani, 2020). The Turkish nationalists saw the conversion of the museum into a mosque as a return to their Ottoman Empire roots and a victory over foreign interference (The Editorial Board, 2020; Çevik, 2020). According to a survey conducted in June 2020, the majority of the Turkish people view the Hagia Sophia dispute as a ploy by the government to deflect attention from economic concerns and reverse its dwindling popularity since Istanbul is full of mosques and the nearby Sultan Ahmad Mosque is almost deserted during prayer hours (Çevik, 2020).

Christian leaders' reactions have been rather restrained due to a concern about inciting sectarianism. Pope Francis expressed "pain," while Bartholomew, the Eastern Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople, expressed grief that the Hagia Sophia would no longer be "a location and symbol of meeting, discussion, and peaceful coexistence of peoples and civilizations" (The Editorial Board, 2020). He also feared that its conversion would result in a split between East and West since Hagia Sophia represents a symbolic understanding between Christianity and Islam (Marshall, 2020). The Russian Orthodox Church expressed sadness, warning that it may lead to further division (Bazuk, 2020).

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo encouraged Turkey to keep the monument open to the public as an example of its commitment to respecting the religious traditions and diverse heritage that shaped the Republic of Turkey. The foreign minister of Cyprus said that turning Hagia Sophia into a mosque is a terrible attack on "a universal symbol of the Orthodox faith" (Marshall, 2020).

UNESCO declared that the conversion was a tremendous loss to the global nature of heritage and mentioned that Hagia Sophia is a unique masterpiece that shows evidence of the historical communication between Europe and Asia. Its position as a museum is a symbol of intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO also confirmed that Turkey has to maintain the physical structure and accessibility of the site to avoid a violation of the 1972 World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 2020). But Erdogan said that Hagia Sophia would still be open to the public when it wasn't used for Muslim prayers. He also noted that Christian paintings would stay on display, even though they would be covered during Muslim prayers (Reuters Staff, 2020).

Last but not least, the outcome of the Hagia Sophia conversion on the peaceful cohabitation of all creeds can be summarized as a decision that restores east-west dichotomies, with the Christian and secular worlds expressing dismay at the choice and the devout Muslim world expressing complete support. In other words, this action has generated unnecessary divisiveness (Burhani, 2020; Marshall, 2020).

The Transformation of Shah Ramzan Mahi Savar Shrine into a Hindu Temple

The Hagia Sophia episode may have left only hard feelings, but fortunately, no fatalities occurred. Other cases of forced religious conversion, particularly those involving shared religious heritage sites, have resulted in a slew of catastrophic tragedies. One of the most obvious examples is the case of the Indian shrine of Shah Ramzan Mahi Savar, located in the village of Madhi in the Ahmednagar district. This area was established as a Muslim territory in the 15th century (Hayden, 2002).

Historically, the long presence of Muslims in the Ahmadnagar region was a reason behind the formation of a significant Muslim population and a sizable number of distinctly Muslim shrines, tombs, mosques, and other "medieval" structures. Additionally, the complicated political history of this region has led to the existence of a group of saints who are both Muslims and Hindus (Gadre, 1986).

Muslims revere the Madhi shrine as the dargā of Shah Ramzan Mahi Savar, while Hindus revere it as the samādhi of Sri Kanobah, or Kanifnath. The 1885 Bombay Gazetteer stated that a fair was held annually in the saint's honor, attracting between 20,000 and 30,000 Hindu and Muslim pilgrims (Randhawa, 2012).

Later, in the early 1990s, the event attracted 200,000 and 300,000 Hindu and Muslim pilgrims. The practiced rites include both Hindu and Muslim beliefs. Offerings such as money, sweets, peacock feathers, and beef are presented to the holy saint (Hulbe et al., 1976). The annual festival demonstrates that Hindus and Muslims are devoted to the saint, reflecting his syncretistic personality (Hayden, 2002).

However, around 1977, Hindus began the process of Hinduizing the shrine by adding religious Hindu icons and removing Islamic features such as the green cover, glass balls, and Basmala inscription. In 1990, the physical Hinduization of the structure was completed by erecting a huge trident in front of the main site and demolishing a nearby building that was thought to be a mosque (Burman, 2001).

The Muslim community lost possession of the shrine through legal proceedings that began in 1923 and ended in 1990. The final conversion of the shrine in 1990 was the latest stage in a series of contests over the shrine's and saint's identity dating back to its founding (Hayden, 2002).

Unsurprisingly, the struggle over the shrine resulted in several communal riots. For example, a riot in February 1926 was met with police intervention. As a result, the shrine was placed under police authority to end the conflicts over its possession. On September 6, 1926, another riot occurred, leading to the arrest of four Muslims and seven Hindus (Hayden, 2002). This tense atmosphere escalated, especially after the demolition of the 16th-century Babri mosque in 1992 (Gopal, 1991). These events sparked a massive wave of Hindu-Muslim violence, resulting in at least 2,000 deaths across India (Ludden, 1996; Sinha, 2008).

Hayden (2002) describes the Hinduization of the Madhi shrine as embodying modern "communalism." He also believes that some conflict over the shrine is based on the ownership of offerings from thousands of pilgrims. According to him, "antagonistic tolerance" between various religious groups occurs in all mixed areas at all times but manifests itself in one of two ways: passive tolerance or fierce conflict. He adds that the saint's identity has been a competitive matter. During Muslim rule, the saint was recognized as a Muslim, and the shrine was under Muslim custody. When neither Muslims nor Hindus had power during the British occupation, the Hindus received government recognition of their rights to the shrine and its revenues. This is a strategy to maintain peace between conflicting parties in the interest of the British colony. After independence, in a country where Hindus have local power, even in a secular state, they were given control of the shrine by the government, and the public image of the saint was changed to that of a Hindu.

According to Hayden (2002), the alteration of the shrine and the saint's identity appears to be a nasty tale of authority and persecution. This case also highlights the role of the government in controlling religion and the rise of "communalism" and, by extension, "intolerance." However, while Hayden believes that shared religious heritage sites demonstrate competition between religious groups and "tolerance" as a practical response to a situation where it may be impossible to suppress the practices of the other group, other shared religious heritage sites embrace syncretistic activities that may suggest a more positive case for active tolerance. These shared religious heritage sites (e.g., the Islamic pilgrimage site of Ajmer Sharif in India, Ghriba Synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia, and Adam's Peak in SriLanka) are characterized by hospitality and tolerance, showing that people of different religions can learn to respect and understand each other (Boum, 2012; Shinde, 2015; Barkey et al., 2018). In other words, the concept of sharing religious heritage sites is complex because it encompasses different situations where both tolerance and intolerance are present.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the forceful conversion of religious heritage sites has profound consequences for religious harmony, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. It perpetuates division, hatred, and discrimination among religious groups, undermining the foundation of peaceful coexistence. To prevent such conflicts, it is crucial to prioritize the protection and preservation of religious heritage sites, promote interfaith dialogue, and foster mutual respect and understanding among diverse religious communities. Only through these efforts can we strive towards a society that values and embraces religious diversity, promoting a harmonious coexistence for all.

REFERENCES

1. Albrifkany, M. (2016). Analysis of Converted Historical Mediterranean Churches and Mosques. Gazimağusa, North Cyprus: Eastern Mediterranean University.
2. Barkey, K., Albera, D., & Pénicaud, M. (2018). Sharing Holy Places across the Mediterranean. In N. Luz, K. Barkey, D. Albera, & M. Pénicaud (Eds.), Shared Sacred Sites (pp. 15-33). New York: The New York Library & The Morgan Library & Museum .
3. Bazuk, N. (2020). Russians Still Hope Hagia Sophia To Remain Orthodox – OpEd. Eurasia Review news & analysis. Retrieved from https://www.eurasiareview.com/04082020-russians-still-hope-hagia-sophia-to-remain-orthodox-oped/
4. Boum, A. (2012). "Sacred Week": Re-experiencing Jewish-Muslim coexistence in urban Moroccan space. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/1803585/_Sacred_Week_Re_experiencing_Jewish_Muslim_Co_existence_in_Urban_Moroccan_Space

5. Burhani, A. N. (2020). Hagia Sophia's Reversion into a Mosque: A Worrying Precedent? ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Retrieved from https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/hagia-sophias-reversion-into-a-mosque-a-worrying-precedent/

6. Burman, J. J. (2001). Shivaji's Myth and Maharashtra's Syncretic Traditions. Economic and Political Weekly, 36(14/15), 1226-1234.

7. Causevic, S. (2020). The Hagia Sophia's Reversion to a Mosque is at Odds with its Status as a Unesco World Heritage Site. The National Interest. Retrieved from https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/hagia-sophias-reversion-mosque-odds-its-status-unesco-world-heritage-site-165815

8. Çevik, S. (2020). Political Implications of the Hagia Sophia Reconversion. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik . Retrieved from https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/political-implications-of-the-hagia-sophia-reconversion

9. Daily Sabah . (2021). Istanbul's reverted Hagia Sophia Mosque welcomes millions in a year. Daily Sabah . Retrieved from https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/istanbul/istanbuls-reverted-hagia-sophia-mosque-welcomes-millions-in-a-year

10. De-Caro, S. (2017). Religious heritage and tolerance. In G. Wijesuriya, & S. Lee (Eds.), Asian Buddhist Heritage Conserving the Sacred (pp. 11-19). Rome: ICCROM.

11. Firth, R. (1981). Spiritual Aroma: Religion and Politics. American Anthropologist, New Series, 83(3), 582–601.

12. Gadre, P. B. (1986). Cultural Archaeology of Ahmadnagar During Nizam Shai Period, 1494-1632. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation.

13. Gopal, S. (1991). Anatomy of a confrontation: The Babri Masjid–Ramjanmabhumi issue. Delhi: Penguin.

14. Harris, S. (2004). The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason. New York: Norton.

15. Hayden, R. M. (2002). Balkans, Antagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites in South Asia and the. Current Anthropology, 43(2), 205-231.

16. Hulbe, S. K., Vetschera, T., & Khomne., S. B. (1976). The sacred complex at Madhi. Man in India, 56, 237- 62.

17. Karlström, A. (2013). Spirits and the ever-changing heritage. Material Religion, 9(3), 395–399. https://doi.org/10.2752/175183413X13730330869112

18. Ludden, D. (1996). Ayodhya: A window on the world. In D. Ludden (Ed.), Contesting the nation: Religion, community, and the politics of democracy in India. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

19. Marshall, P. (2020). Implications of the Hagia Sophia's Conversion to a Mosque. Providence. Retrieved from https://providencemag.com/2020/07/implications-hagia-sophia-conversion-mosque/

20. Randhawa, K. B. (2012). Networking through Religion: The Case of Malerkotla. In J. K. Wellman, & C. Lombardi (Eds.), Perspective, Religion and Human Security: A Global Perspective (pp. 94-112). Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199827732.001.0001

21. Reuters Staff. (2020). Hagia Sophia mosaics will be covered with curtains during prayers: Turkish presidential spokesman. Reuters. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-hagiasophia-erdogan-idUSKCN24K0OS

22. Shinde, K. A. (2015). Religious tourism and religious tolerance: insights from pilgrimage sites in India. Tourism Review, 70(3), 179-196. doi:https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-10-2013-0056

23. Sinha, A. (2008). Blast a revenge for Babri. Indian Express.

24. Tamma, M., & Sartori, R. (2017). Religious Heritage: Sharing and Integrating Values, Fruition, Resources, Responsibilities. In S. Pinton, & L. Zagato (Eds.), Cultural Heritage. Scenarios 2015-2017 (pp. 557-572). Italia: Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

25. The Editorial Board. (2020). Opinion The Hagia Sophia Was a Cathedral, a Mosque and a Museum. It's Converting Again. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/opinion/hagia-sophia-mosque.html

26. UNESCO. (2020, July 10). UNESCO statement on Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. Retrieved from UNESCO: https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-statement-hagia-sophia-istanbul

27. Wegner, E. (2004). Hagia Sophia, 532–37. Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. Retrieved from https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/haso/hd_haso.htm