

Platform of Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform / Those who are backing our cultural heritage Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage / Chapter 24

"After a Conference" with Doğan Bermek, İřtar Gözaydın, Vanessa R. Obaldiía

ADİP International Conference on Transformations in Places of Faith
The Conversion of Spaces and Places of Worship in Anatolia

TOPICS: Main Themes of the Conference, Transformations in terms of Modern Law and International Law, Social and Cultural Impacts: Effects on Social Peace and Tolerance, Future Perspectives and Suggestions for Protection, Public Awareness and Education, International Cooperation and Global Awareness.

Nükhet Everi: The topic of the today's Anatolian Religions and Beliefs Platform's (ADİP) "Those who are backing our cultural heritage" talk Vanguards of Our Cultural Heritage interview will be is the "Transformations in Places of Belief" Conversion of Spaces and Places of Worship International Conference we organised in April 2019/2021. Our conference was a comprehensive event where places of belief were discussed from a historical, cultural, and legal perspectives. Today, we are hosting Doğan Bermek, founding member of ADİP and President of the Alevi Philosophy Centre (ADO) Think Tank, Prof. Dr. İřtar Gözaydın, an expert on political and administrative law, and Dr. Vanessa R. de Obaldiía, an orientalist Arabist and Ottomanologist, to discuss the repercussions and outcomes of this conference.

Doğan Bermek: To briefly talk about myself, I have been working on human rights and folklore for many years. For the last twenty years, I have been particularly focused on Alevism and freedom of belief. In 2019, we established ADİP and carried out important projects under this platform. The "Transformations in Places of Belief" Conversion of Spaces and Places of Worship in Anatolia conference we organised in April was one of these projects. This two-day event attracted much more attention than we expected and was extremely successful with the contributions of many academics. This conference was the first step towards a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between faith and transformation.

Nükhet Everi: İřtar Hocam, you were one of the speakers at the conference. What are your thoughts on this subject?

Prof. Dr. İřtar Gözaydın: The transformation of religious spaces is a very important issue in terms of both politics and law. Throughout history, political powers have endeavoured to transform the spaces of other faiths in order to keep their own beliefs superior and to show their dominance. It is possible to see many examples of this situation from the Middle Ages to the modern era. Although such transformations are not legally possible in the modern era, political powers still do not give up renounce this tendency. For this reason, this conference organised by ADİP provided an opportunity to examine in depth how places of belief were transformed in Anatolia.

Nükhet Everi: Vanessa, you also brought an international perspective to the conference. What are your views?

Dr Vanessa R. de Obaldiía: Although ADİP is a very new platform, it has managed to do effective work in a short time. This conference was organised especially in response to the conversion of Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya) and Chora (Kariye) Museums into Mosques. These conversions have created religious and political debates within and outside Turkey/Türkiye. The conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque sparked a worldwide debate on how historical and cultural heritage should be protected. We have therefore organised an international conference to address the issue of the

conversion of places and spaces of worship in a broader context. The aim of the conference was to discuss how places of worship have been transformed throughout history and the social, cultural, and legal implications of these transformations.

Nükhet Everi: Vanessa, the global impact of these transformations is a really very important topic. Mr. Doğan, which topics were discussed at the conference and what conclusions were reached?

Doğan Bermek: The conference was shaped around four main themes: Historical Perspective, Legal Aspects, Social and Cultural Impacts, and Future Perspectives. In the Historical Perspective session, spatial transformations that took place in Anatolia induring different periods were analysed. For exampleAs a case in point, examples such as the conversion of buildings built as churches during the Byzantine period into mosques during the Ottoman period were discussed. The causes and consequences of these transformations were emphasised.

In the Legal Dimension session, the attitude of modern law towards such transformations and the role of international law were discussed. In particular, it was discussed whether international law comes into play in the case of changing the status of buildings on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

In the Social and Cultural Impacts session, the effects of space transformations on society were discussed. How does the transformationconversion of a place of worship affect the community around that place? What kind of consequences does it have on social peace and tolerance? Answers to these questions were sought.

Finally, in the Future Perspectives session, what can be done to prevent such transformations was discussed.. It was discussed wWhat role non-governmental organisations and international organisations can play in this regard and what kind of work can be done to raise public awareness. At the end of the conference, in the light of all these discussions, we published a declaration on the protection of places of belief and measures to be taken against their conversion.

Nükhet Everi: Prof. Dr İřtar Gözaydın, from a legal perspective, could you explain how such transformations are evaluated in international law?

Prof. Dr. İřtar Gözaydın: International law prioritises the protection of cultural and historical heritage, especially within the framework of UNESCO agreements on cultural heritage. Structures included in the UNESCO World Heritage List are considered to be the common heritage not only of the country in which they are located, but also of all humanity. Therefore, changing the status of such buildings may require the intervention of international law. However, the fact that there is not always an effective control or sanction mechanism in this regard may lead to some problems.

For example, the decision to convert Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque was criticised by many international organisations and UNESCO stated that this decision should be reviewed. However, in terms of international law, it is still debatable whether there are adequate means to prevent or reverse such conversions.

Such conversions are often seen as a show of force by political powers, which can reduce the effectiveness of legal processes. Therefore, the international community and civil society organisations need to play a more active role in this regard.

Nükhet Everi: Vanessa, from an international perspective, what can you say about the impact of such transformations on cultural heritage?

Dr Vanessa R. de Obaldıia: The protection of cultural heritage is not only a sign of respect for the past, but also an important responsibility that must be passed on to future generations. The

transformation of places of worship has a huge impact not only in a religious sense, but also in a cultural and social sense. Such conversions can often lead to a community losing part of its identity and history.

For example, the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque was met with a great reaction both in the Christian world and in secularist circles. Such conversions can create tensions between communities and lead to cultural clashes. For this reason, I think that we should be more careful and sensitive about changing the status of places of worship. The protection of cultural heritage does not only mean the protection of physical structures; it also means the protection of the historical and social meanings that these structures carry.

Nükhet Everi: Mr. Doğan, how do you think public awareness can be raised against such transformations?

Doğan Bermek: Raising public awareness is the most effective defence mechanism against such transformations. This process of raising awareness should start with education and be spread to all segments of society. Schools should offer courses on the importance and protection of cultural heritage, and students should be made aware of this issue. In addition, non-governmental organisations and the media should play an active role in this issue.

For example, informing local people about such transformations and involving them in the process can increase social acceptance. Furthermore, through international co-operation and projects, a global awareness can be raised on the protection of cultural heritage.

There are successful examples in this regard. For example, As a case in point, in Italy, many historical buildings have been preserved and restored in Italy through the efforts of local people and civil society organisations. Such examples can also be a source of inspiration for us.

Nükhet Everi: Prof. İftar, what were the legal aspects of the conference that particularly attracted your attention?

Prof. Dr. İftar Gözaydın: There were a few points that attracted attention. Firstly, the inadequacy of the existing laws and the difficulties experienced in the implementation of these laws. Especially in countries like Turkey/Türkiye, although there are legal regulations on the protection of cultural heritage, there can be serious problems in the implementation of these laws. Secondly, how international law can come into play in this regard. Although international organisations such as UNESCO play an important role in the protection of cultural heritage, their power of enforcement power may be limited.

Therefore, more effective laws need to be created and implemented at national and international level. It is also crucial that local governments and civil society organisations are more actively involved in this process. Another important outcome of the conference was to underline that in addition to the law, social awareness and education also play a critical role in this process.

Nükhet Everi: Vanessa, what do you think about the outcomes of the conference and future steps to be taken?

Dr Vanessa R. de Obaldía: The results of the conference gave us important clues about the steps to be taken in the future. First of all, I think that international co-operation should be strengthened. The protection of cultural heritage is not only the responsibility of one country, but also the common responsibility of all humanity. Therefore, stronger cooperation between international organisations, governments and civil society organisations should be established.

Secondly, raising public awareness is of great importance. All segments of society need to be made aware of the protection of cultural heritage. This awareness-raising process should start with education in schools and reach large masses the general public through the media.

Thirdly, I believe that local people should be involved in the process for the protection of cultural heritage. The active role of local people in this process will increase both the protection of cultural heritage and the social acceptance of this heritage. Therefore, it is of great importance that local administrations and civil society organisations play a more active role in this issue.