



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Foreign Places:
The Mediterranean: Istanbul**

The Mediterranean

<u>Report</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Getting Started
2	Arriving
3	Istanbul
4	Rhodes
5	Crete
6	Malta
7	Sicily
8	Sardinia
9	Minorca
10	Corsica
11	Civitavecchia

The Mediterranean Report Three: Istanbul

Istanbul was founded in 667 BC by a Greek, named Byzas. Because of its strategic importance and crossroads location, it experienced centuries of warfare between many priests, soldiers, and merchants. Notably: Athenians, Persians, Spartans, Macedonians, Romans, Greeks, Ottomans, Arabs, Bulgarians, and Russians. Presently, the Turks are in charge.

June 4, 2006

We arrived yesterday in Istanbul, Turkey. Today was devoted to sightseeing and recovering from jet lag.

As noted previously, Istanbul is an old city and because of its strategic position, it has been invaded by a wide assortment of well-wishers. For a while, Muslims and Christians took turns changing churches and mosques into mosques and churches respectfully, while at the same time, slaughtering each other. One of the most impressive of these structures is the Blue Mosque, shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The Blue Mosque.

The inside of this mosque is decorated with blue Iznik tiles. Thus, its name. Its six minarets are an exception to the Muslim tradition regarding the construction of minarets. Our tour guide said they were built because of a miscommunication between Sultan Ahmet I---the person in charge of Istanbul at that time---and the building contractor.

The Sultan wanted golden minarets, but the word *golden* was confused with the word *six*. The Sultan let the minarets stand. Perhaps he realized stone prayer towers were less likely to draw the attention of religious competitors who might be looking for gold to decorate their altars.

The Blue Mosque is modeled after two religious buildings of Istanbul: Hagia Sophia, "...considered the greatest building of the Byzantine Empire, and the Süleymaniye Mosque. The basic design of the three structures is the same: an almost square space surmounted by a dome. The dome of the Blue Mosque is flanked on four sides by half-domes, and surrounded by a further arrangement of turrets, domes, and half-domes."¹

¹ "Blue Mosque," *Microsoft Encarta*, 2006, Microsoft Corporation, 1993-2005.

No Proselytizing, but Killing Encouraged

I was reared in a Southern Baptist environment. As with most people, I am curious about my religion's similarities and differences in comparison to others. As one example, my pastors were hellfire and brimstone orators. They scared the sin out of their congregations' souls. Many of my fellow Baptists did their best to convert sinning Methodists to our correct religion. My Sunday school teacher said Catholics were doomed to go to Hell, and it was our duty to save them.

I asked our guide about these concepts of religion. He replied, "No priests, no pastors. Our prayers are led by a learned person who knows the Quran, but the person is chosen by the congregation. We've no missionaries. Using your word, we've no proselytizers. And the Quran instructs us to tolerate other beliefs."

I responded, "Okay in theory, but that's not what I read in the papers. A lot of Muslims don't hold your view. For example, Sunnis and Shias routinely 'proselytize' before beheading each other."

He granted my point and offered that my example was the exception, not the rule. I did not want to disrupt the tour any further, so I let it ride.

Later, as we were walking to another site, I asked him about the idea of taking out a contract on someone who makes a joke about Mohammed. I offered that Christians never issued a fatwa to designate Andrew Rice and Lloyd Weber as "dead meat" because they composed the opera *Jesus Christ, Superstar*.

The guide responded, "What you are reading and seeing are about people who have radical...and I think...incorrect interpretations of the Quran."

I remained silent.

I will leave this subject with the notion that it makes little difference to the dead tourist if the suicide bomber was or was not religiously correct. The dead tourist remains dead. It is the interpretation that matters to the dead person.

I have read enough of (and about) the Quran to conclude the Islamic-based "teachers" who instruct their students to kill noncombatants are distorting the intent of the Quran regarding *jihad*. I have documented my studies in other writings and will be happy to share them, if you are curious.

Anyway, it is not so much that a religion does damage to its followers and unwary by-standers. Often, religion does good things. Over and over again, it protects us from ourselves. Frequently, religion makes us feel good. But all too often, religion distributes mayhem to its masses in the guise of salvation and soulful purity. During this time, the innocent by-stander becomes a dead by-stander.

With that cheerful thought, we visit another beautiful building in Istanbul.

Our next visit was to the Hagia Sophia. This building was once a church, later a mosque, then a church, etc. After numerous renovations---for example, redoing a door so it would face toward Mecca---the edifice was converted to a museum, perhaps to keep it out of religious disputes. Figure 2 provides a view of a part of the dome of Hagia Sophia. The dome was stunning. So were the walls. They were constructed of several kinds of stone, some resembling grayish blue wallpaper.

While we beheld the interior of these extraordinary structures, the guide informed us why women inside a mosque must (a) cover their heads, (b) cover their legs, and (c) pray in a separate, partitioned area from the men. He informed us these rules were not meant to be discriminating but were implemented to insure the men's thoughts did not stray from the reverential to the sexual. I wondered if the women were consulted on this matter.

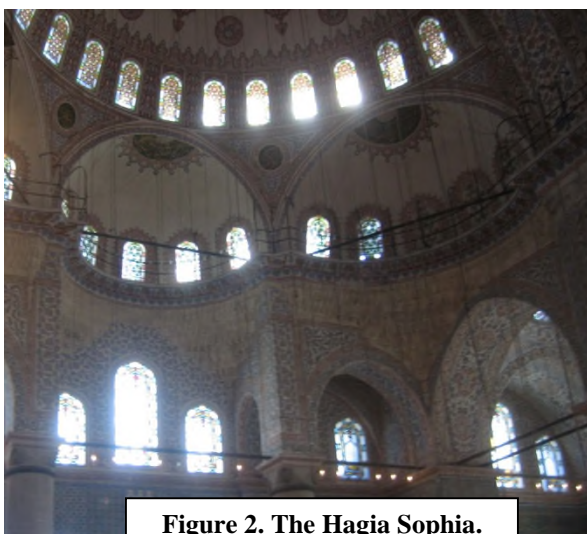


Figure 2. The Hagia Sophia.

They were interesting concepts, ideas I had not considered. After thinking about them, I reflected back to my younger days at the First Baptist Church. I recalled on more than one occasion when my thoughts strayed from a sermon to a good looking set of legs. If Jimmy Carter could do it, so could I. But unlike Jimmy, I never felt guilty about it.

Our guide told us the ancient Persians fought frequently with the local Istanbul citizens and usually won the skirmishes. On one occasion, the Greeks, who had ventured across the Aegean Sea to occupy the city for a few decades, won a battle with the Persians.



Figure 3. Melted-down booty.

They melted-down the Persians' metal arms and created the obelisk shown in Figure 3. It is designed around three curved snakes, whose heads were stolen several centuries ago. Perhaps the Persians stole them, as they were looking to rearm. Who knows? So much of this ancient history is as much speculation as it is truth.

These landmarks of Turkey offer remarkable sights and experiences for the tourist, as well as for the historian. If you are passing through Istanbul, be sure to see them. They are located in the part of the city that offers many examples---with associated icons---of a rich and fascinating past.

Constantine and Constantinople

The name *Constantine* is legendary in this part of the world and is a favored topic in western history books as well. Constantine's visions, characterized by some scholars as delusions, were

revolutionary. He was the first Roman emperor to be converted to Christianity and the first person of significance to rule in the name of Christ. He established Christianity as the preferred religion in the Roman state, yet extended toleration to all religions. He made the city of Byzantium the capital of the Roman Empire. Later, Byzantium became known as Constantinople, the "City of Constantine." Later, it became Istanbul.

Constantine stands as a major figure in the history of the Mediterranean, as well as the world. Critics, pro and con, agree he was instrumental in the spread of Christianity to medieval Europe. My college fraternity, Sigma Chi, holds him as an exemplar of fidelity, faith, and fiefdom. Some of his sayings are embedded into the Sigma Chi rituals, which I cannot repeat because of the risk of losing my membership.

Some scholars believe Rome first fell into disrepair and then ruin because of Constantine's abandonment of the sword for the cross. They believe the once mighty empire, Rome, lost its place in the world after its emperor Constantine, "forsook the martial arts for 'love thy neighbor.'"²

Could be. "Turning the other cheek" is a recent entry on humans' resume.

Other reasons contributed to Rome's downfall: The Romans' reliance on foreigners to protect their gates and castles, coupled with their arrogant dismissal of their neighbors---nearby German tribes---who decided to invade the empire to sample Roman baths and its bathers.

I will keep these reports brief. So, I am not doing justice to Istanbul. I hope to return someday and spend more time here. For now, on to Rhodes.

² Pat J. Buchanan, "Where the Right Went Wrong" (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 2.