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Breaking the News

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Breaking the news

Sometimes, intercommunal distance can actually ease conversation, by freeing the conversants of the fear of causing offence or giving up power. Interpersonal distance can help communication too, by breaking up normal politesse on the rough terrain over which it is dragged or pushed – sudden meetings, awkward settings, imperfectly-spoken languages. I experienced that, during my research into the destruction of cultural heritage during the Cyprus

Conflict. One afternoon, I drove into a formerly-mixed village in Cyprus in a Turkish Cypriot car. When I asked, one of the Greek Cypriot residents immediately insisted that there had never been a mosque in the village. Then the Greek Cypriot asked me if I was Turkish Cypriot and, on finding out that I wasn't, equally immediately pointed out the wasteland where the mosque had once stood.

Sometimes, information would breach emotional barriers and bond individuals and communities together. It would help people meet each other as individuals, rather than as representatives of groups (or as true representatives of groups being themselves, rather than as community members playing heroes, defending themselves against mythical enemies). Yet it cannot be communicated directly, because it would not be accepted as information if it were presented by the 'enemy' community.

I'm currently living in Kayseri, in southern Turkey. While walking around a suburb called Talas (or Mouttalas), I visited Yaman Dede Camii (or Panagia Rum Kilisesi) – the Mosque of Yaman Dede (or the Ottoman Greek Church of the Virgin Mary). I noticed some people who looked slightly less foreign than me, and realised they were Greek tourists.

The Christian Greeks filed up and down the steps to the church-mosque in small groups, each showing different understandings of history and attitudes towards Turks and Muslims. On our way up the steps, one woman read the brown sign that indicated both of the building's identities. She rolled around her mouth the Turkish-language version ("Rum") of the Ottoman Empire's Greek Orthodox Christian community's name for themselves ("Romaioi" [ref])(East) Romans; Byzantines. There were solely Ottoman/Turkish-speaking Orthodox who called themselves *Rum*, and bilingual *Konstantinoupolites* still call themselves *Rum* in Turkish.[/ref]).

At the church-mosque, in one group, one person reminded another before they went in, 'you are to take your shoes off [na vgaleis ta papoutsia sou]'. In another group, one person stood outside uncertain what they had to do to show respect until another, who was already inside in a shared-word and mime-based conversation with the caretaker, smilingly explained that all they had to do was 'take off your shoes and come in [vgale ta papoutsia sou kai bes]'.

In yet another group, one person was in the process of taking their shoes off when another bitterly scolded them, 'don't be taking them off [mh vgazeis ta]' –because that is only correct etiquette if the building is a mosque, not if it is (still) a church. Some people refused even to get off the bus to look at the converted building.

The caretaker pointed out a string of prayer beads hanging from a wire above us, then he and a man from the tour group grinned as they mimed out to each other a playful boy flinging his beads high into the air until they caught the wire –‘chak!’ – and swung around it. Studying the style of prayer beads, the caretaker and the tourist both thought the boy had been from the other community.



The Ottoman-Turkish church-mosque, Kayseri, Turkey

We all admired the Ottoman Christian architecture and (most, if not all of us) the sympathetic conversion (for example, the minimalist interpretation of a minaret). It was particularly pleasantly surprising because the church was converted into a mosque in 1925, just a couple of years after the last grotesque acts in a conflict that comprised states' wars against each other, communities' massacres of each other, and a religious nationalist parastate's genocide of non-Turkish non-Muslim communities.



View of the minaret of Yaman Dede Camii, Kayseri, Turkey

I hadn't expected the following conversation, and even before it started there was already a jumble of Greek and Turkish in my head and mouth, so I can't remember it word-for-word. Nonetheless, in the street, before we left, the Turkish-speaking Greek tour guide and I were told that Yaman Dede was Orthodox Christian, then he became Muslim; he converted to Islam, then he converted the church into a mosque.

The tour guide thanked the person who told us this, then with an apologetic smile that said "I'm sure you'll understand", the guide suggested, 'don't say that [to them] – I'll explain it to them, when we're back on the bus...'.

