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## HAGIA SOPHIA'S STATUS AS A MOSQUE MOCKS PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S COVENANT WITH CHRISTIANITY

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In 2019, I had the pleasure of immersing myself in the history of both Christianity and Islam, where they are woven together in the beautiful and magnificent architecture of the Hagia Sophia.

During my trip, numerous Christian icons, which were plastered over during the Ottoman Empire, were being uncovered and restored, bringing back to life its true Christian history. I remember thinking to myself, Turkey should be proud of this heritage and of its efforts to preserve and to further uncover the Christian heritage of this building. Only a country and leader secure in its identity would invest in such an effort.

It was, therefore, very disappointing to read about the effort underway to convert the Church commissioned by the emperor Justinian I in 537—turned mosque by Mehmed II in 1453, turned museum in 1934 by Turkish President Kemal Atatürk—back to a mosque by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Millions of Muslims around the world are applauding Erdogan's move, in their arrogantly fake religiosity.

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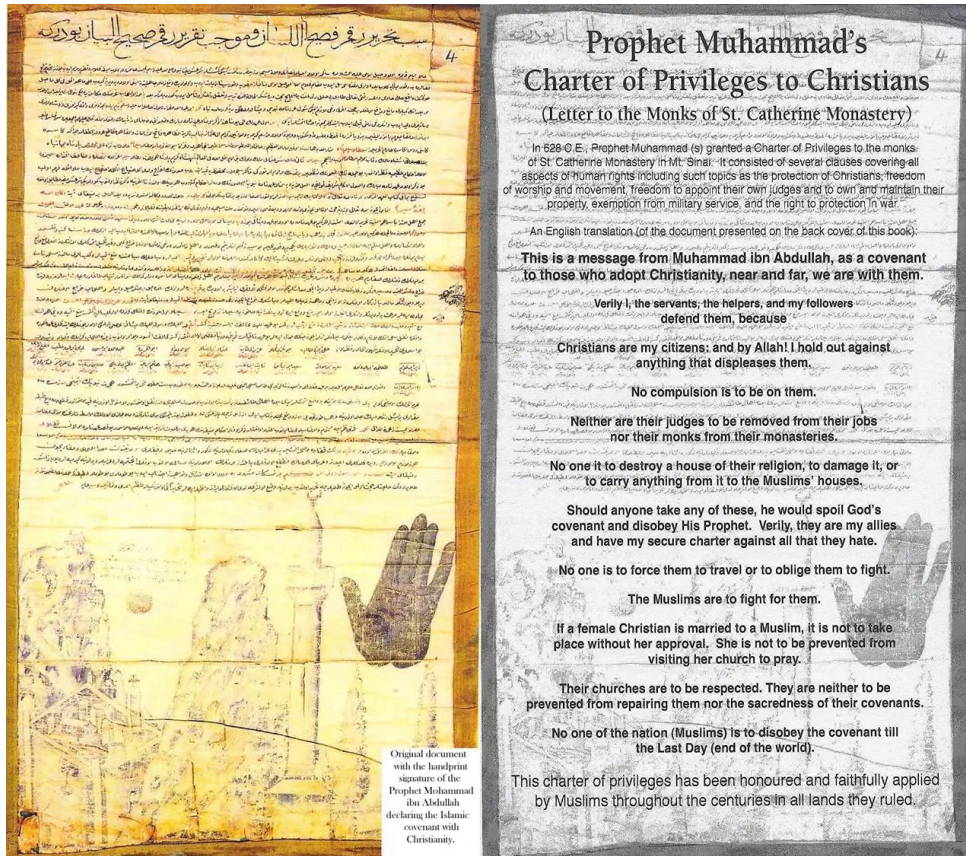
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Do Muslims not know that they are breaking a covenant Prophet Muhammad made with Christians? Both Mehmet II and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's act of converting Hagia Sophia back to a mosque has nothing to do with Islamic tradition of respect, but one of power. A covenant from Prophet Muhammad to the Orthodox Christians of the Monks of St. Catherine in Mount Sinai extended protection of Christians and their places of worship dictating that "no one of the Muslim nations is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day."



Among the protections granted are:

*No compulsion is to be on them.*

*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.*

*If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray.*

*Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor the sacredness of their covenants.*

As Craig Considine states in the article "Religious Pluralism and Civic Rights in a 'Muslim Nation': An Analysis of Prophet Muhammad's Covenants with Christians," some contemporary Muslims still challenge this charter's **authenticity**, despite the fact that "***The authenticity of the Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Monks of Sinai was confirmed by Muslim Caliphs from early Fatimid times until the end of Ottoman times.***" Interestingly, a **treaty** with similar language exists between the Prophet of Islam and the Christians of Narjan. These documents, notwithstanding

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their disputed pedigree, tell only part of an often-neglected story of respect between Christianity and Islam. Earlier on in Islam's history, when the first converts to Islam were persecuted in Mecca, Prophet Muhammad instructed them to seek protection from King Negus, a Christian King in Abyssinia, a kingdom located in present-day Ethiopia. Even the Meccans' attempt at bribery didn't resolve the King's principled stance to protect the persecuted and for justice.

King Negus' adamant protection of the Meccan Muslims, and the covenant to protect Christians by Prophet Muhammad, represent the principled respect, love, and understanding for each other that is largely void in our current world of religion and politics. Just as the icons of Hagia Sophia demonstrate its Christian heritage, these charters represent the true, inclusive Islam. Yet, there are some who want to cover it up: the revelation of such covenants is a shock to most Muslims whose religious education excludes the beauty of Islam and its inclusive traditions. It is therefore this ignorance that enables the euphoric support for the conversion of the Museum to a Mosque.



Having experienced long lines and scarcity of admission tickets for a visit to Hagia Sophia, and having viewed the vast scale of the Christian iconography there, it is doubtful these images can be temporarily covered before the onset of each of the Muslim worshiping time slots, which are

five times a day. If logistically doable, it will be interesting to see how long the exercise of covering and uncovering will last.

There is something peaceful about the Quran's teaching of "there is no compulsion in faith" (verse: 2:256) and the practice of openness and acceptance as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad toward the Christians. If President Erdogan truly wants to represent Islam in its true light, he should convert Hagia Sophia back to a church at best, but at minimum, keep it as a museum, for all of us to enjoy its beauty unhindered.

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*Ani Zonneveld is founder and president of Muslims for Progressive Values and founder of the Alliance for Inclusive Muslims.*

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