

Would the Prophet Muhammad Convert Hagia Sophia?

Turkey's decision to change the former cathedral into a mosque flies against the pluralist instincts of Islam's founders.



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Hagia Sophia in Istanbul on Friday. Credit...Chris McGrath/Getty Images

The recent decision by the Turkish government to reconvert the majestic [Hagia Sophia](#), which was once the world's greatest cathedral, from a museum back to a mosque has been bad news for Christians around the world. They include Pope Francis, [who said he was "pained"](#) by the move, and the spiritual leader of Eastern Christianity, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, [who said he was "saddened and shaken."](#) When contrasted with the joy of Turkey's conservative Muslims, all this may seem like a new episode in an old story: Islam vs. Christianity.

But some Muslims, including myself, are not fully comfortable with this historic step, and for a good reason: forced conversion of shrines, which has occurred too many times in human history in all directions, can be questioned even from a purely Islamic point of view.

To see why, look closely into early Islam, which was born in seventh century Arabia as a monotheist campaign against polytheism. The Prophet Muhammad and his small group of believers saw the earlier monotheists — Jews and Christians — as allies. So when those first Muslims were persecuted in pagan Mecca, some found asylum in the Christian kingdom in Ethiopia. Years later, when the Prophet ruled Medina, he welcomed a group of Christians from the city of Najran to worship in his own mosque. He also signed a [treaty](#) with them, which read:

“There shall be no interference with the practice of their faith. ... No bishop will be removed from his bishopric, no monk from his monastery, no priest from his parish.”

This religious pluralism was also reflected in the Quran, when it said God protects “monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of God is much mentioned.” (22:40) It is the only verse in the Quran that mentions churches — and only in a reverential tone.

To be sure, these theological affinities did not prevent political conflicts. Nor did they prevent Muslims, right after the Prophet’s passing, from conquering Christian lands, from Syria to Spain. Yet still, the early Muslim conquerors did something uncommon at the time: They did not touch the shrines of the subjugated peoples.

The Prophet’s spirit was best exemplified by his second successor, or caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab, soon after his conquest of Jerusalem in the year 637. The city, which had been ruled by Roman Christians for centuries, had been taken by Muslims after a long and bloody siege. Christians feared a massacre, but instead found *aman*, or safety. Caliph Umar, “the servant of God” and “the commander of the faithful,” gave them security “for their possessions, their churches and crosses.” He further [assured](#):

“Their churches shall not be taken for residence and shall not be demolished ... nor shall their crosses be removed.”

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The Christian historian Eutychius even [tells us](#) that when Caliph Umar entered the city, the patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, invited him to pray at the holiest of all Christian shrines: the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Umar politely declined, saying that Muslims might later take this as a reason to convert the church into a mosque. He instead prayed at an empty area that Christians ignored but Jews honored, then as now, as their holiest site, the Temple Mount, where today the Western Wall, the last remnant of that ancient Jewish temple, rises to the top of the Mount, on which the Mosque of Umar and the Dome of the Rock were built.

In other words, Islam entered Jerusalem without really converting it. Even “four centuries after the Muslim conquest,” as the Israeli historian Oded Peri [observes](#), “the urban landscape of Jerusalem was still dominated by Christian public and religious buildings.”

Yet Islam was becoming the religion of an empire, which, like all empires, had to justify its appetite for hegemony. Soon, some jurists found an excuse to overcome the Jerusalem model: There, Christians were given full security, because they had ultimately agreed on a peaceful surrender. The

cities that resisted Muslim conquerors, however, were fair game for plunder, enslavement, and conversion of their churches.

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In the words of the Turkish scholar [Necmeddin Guney](#), this legitimatization of conversion of churches came from not the Quran nor the Prophetic example, but rather “administrative regulation.” The jurists who made this case, he adds, “were probably trying to create a society that makes manifest the supremacy of Islam in an age of religion wars.”

Another scholar, Fred Donner, an expert on early Islam, [argues](#) that this political drive even distorted records of the earlier state of affairs. For example, later versions of the *aman* given to the Christians of Damascus allotted Muslims “half of their homes and churches.” In the earlier version of the document, there was no such clause.

When the Ottomans reached the gates of Constantinople in 1453, Islamic attitudes had long been imperialized, and also toughened in the face of endless conflicts with the Crusaders. Using a disputed license of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence they followed, they converted Hagia Sophia and a few other major churches. But they also did other things that represent the better values of Islam: They gave full protection to not only Greek but also Armenian Christians, rebuilt Istanbul as a cosmopolitan city, and soon also welcomed the Spanish Jews who were fleeing the Catholic Inquisition.

Today, centuries later, the question for Turkey is what aspect of this complex Ottoman heritage is really more valuable.

For the religious conservatives who have rallied behind President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the past two decades, the main answer seems to be imperial glory embodied in an absolute ruler.

For other Turks, however, the greatness of the Ottomans lies in their pluralism, rooted at the very heart of Islam, and it would inspire different moves today — perhaps opening Hagia Sophia to both Muslim *and* Christian worship, as I have [advised](#) for years. Another would be reopening the [Halki Seminary](#), a Christian school of theology that opened in 1844 under Ottoman auspices, went victim to secular nationalism in 1971, but is still closed despite all the calls from advocates for religious freedom.

For the broader Muslim world, Hagia Sophia is a reminder that our tradition includes both our everlasting faith and values, as well as a legacy of imperialism. The latter is a bitter fact of history, like Christian imperialism or nationalism, which have targeted our mosques and even lives as well — from Cordoba to Srebrenica. But today, we should try to heal such wounds of the past, not open new ones.

So, if we Muslims really want to revive something from the past, let's focus on the model initiated by the Prophet and implemented by Caliph Umar. That means no shrines should be converted — or reconverted. All religious traditions should be respected. And the magnanimity of tolerance should overcome the pettiness of supremacism.

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