His All-Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew  
The Phanar  
Istanbul, Turkey

Your All-Holiness:

As you may recall, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Lord Daniel Brennan and I called on you last October to inform you of our initiative to learn more about the covenants given to Christian communities by the Prophet Muhammad.

With discouragement, I received the news of the decision by the government of Turkey to change the status of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul to a religious property of the Muslim faith. This decision, very political given the domestic politics of Turkey and its confrontation with Greece over rights to the exploitation of gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, may provoke resentment on the part of many Christians and defensive self-righteousness on the part of many Muslims. It adds to worrisome tensions between the faiths and causes disharmony within the Muslim faithful.

The decision by the Turkish government seems, on its face, to contradict the covenant of the Prophet Muhammad given to Christians to protect their churches. Accordingly, I have just written to Pope Francis along these lines:

“But there is a truth higher than the political aspirations and calculations of humanity and that is the transcendent realm of the common good provided by God’s grace.

Reflective of such grace and aware of a great common good, the Prophet Muhammad expressly covenanted with certain Christians that Muslims would not destroy Christian churches or use parts of such churches for mosques.”

In his covenant with the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, the Prophet made this commitment:

“Moreover, no building from among their churches shall be destroyed, nor shall the money from their churches be used for the building of mosques or houses for Muslims.
Whoever does such a thing violates Allah’s covenant and dissents from the messenger of Allah.” (John Andrew Morrow, translation 2013)

Another translation of the covenant reads:

“No one is allowed to plunder these Christians, or destroy or spoil any of their churches, or houses of worship, or take any of the things contained within these houses and bring it to the houses of Islam. And he who takes away anything therefrom, will be one who has corrupted the oath of God, and, in truth, disobeyed His Messenger.” (Anton F. Haddad, translator)

The Prophet’s covenant with the Monastery of St. Catherine further stipulated that “If anyone breaks the covenant herein proclaimed, or contravenes or transgresses its commands, he has broken the Covenant of Allah, breaks his bond, makes a mockery of his religion, deserves the curse of Allah, whether he is a sultan or another among the believing Muslims. … [Muslims] shall never contravene this promise of protection until the hour comes and the world ends.

In his covenant with the Christians of Najran, the Prophet Muhammad pledged:

“I commit myself to support them, to place their persons under my protection, as well as their churches, chapels, oratories, the monasteries of their monks, the residences of their anchorites, wherever they are found, … Nor is it permitted to destroy any part of their churches, to take parts of their buildings to construct mosques or the homes of Muslims.” (John Andrew Morrow, translator, 2013)

Following the terms of these covenants, the second Muslim Caliph, Umar, made a covenant with the Christians of Jerusalem that:

“The Christians have been granted protection for their churches, monasteries and pilgrimage sites inside and outside Jerusalem, these being the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Church of the Nativity along with its grotto and its three doors -- the eastern, northern and western ones, [all of which lead to the narthex] -- for it is there in Bethlehem that Jesus peace be upon him was born.” (Ahmed El-Wakil, translator, 2020)

These covenants of the Prophet Muhammad take precedence over secular administrative rules and regulations as ethical and spiritual principles recognizing the respect due from Muslims to Christians. The righteous sentiments expressed by the Prophet Muhammad in his covenants with Christians provide instruction for a happy resolution of the use of Hagia Sophia today.

The physical structure can be given transcendent purpose by a sharing between the two faiths – Christian and Muslim. The precedent for this is the Cathedral of St. John in Damascus. After the capture of Damascus by Muslim faithful in 634, the cathedral was still in use by the local Christians, but a prayer room for Muslims was constructed in the southeastern part of the building.
It would be most appropriate for the Holy See to note for our global community the existence of the covenants of the Prophet Muhammad to protect Christian churches and to express hope that the guidance of the Prophet would be applied to current use of Hagia Sophia.

The historic areas of the City of Istanbul, already recognized as a World Heritage Site, include the ancient Hippodrome of Constantine, the 6th century Hagia Sophia and the 16th century Suleymaniye Mosque. Designating Hagia Sophia of Christian origin and heritage as a manifestation of universal human aspiration and so open to faiths would ratify the commitments of the Prophet Muhammad while respecting Muslim stewardship of the building.

As the covenants of the Prophet apply to all Christians, I want to share with you my hopes that the promises of the Prophet Muhammad can be brought forth today as a standard for all Muslims to follow in their relationships with Christians. It may be that a joint statement by you and Pope Francis recalling those covenants would transform antagonisms into mutual respect.

Most sincerely yours,

Stephen B. Young
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