

7/2020
October 2020

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AL-AQSA MOSQUE, CORDOBA
CATHEDRAL**

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**CYPRUS CENTER FOR
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UNIVERSITY *of* NICOSIA

1993-2020 TWENTY SEVEN YEARS OF POLICY FORMULATION AND ANALYSIS

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Nicosia, October 2020

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Press: Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, University of
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CONNECTED VESSELS: HAGIAH SOPHIA, AL-AQSA MOSQUE, CORDOBA CATHEDRAL¹

Hagia Sofia returned to us as a mosque full of faith and Quran readings ... This gives hope that the blessed Al-Aqsa mosque will also be owned exclusively by us [Muslims], without obstacles, without invasions by extremist [Jewish] settlers, without closures or prohibitions on prayers issued by the Israeli occupation.

Al-Watan (Qatari newspaper),
25 July 2020²

Some years ago, I paid a visit to the Hagia Sofia mosque [in Istanbul] and to the Cordoba mosque [in Spain]. In both visits I felt the same: in both places you almost feel how the corners [of the mosques] moan and yearn for the Muslim believers' kneeling and bowing [*rak'a*]. In both places you could imagine the moment when prayers stopped and the gates of the mosques shut down, and how it affected the hearts of the Muslims. One of these mosques resumes today its [*muezzin*] calls for prayer [the *adhān*]. We pray to Allah that we will live to hear the call for prayer from the minaret of the grand mosque in Cordoba.

Majed al-Ansari, **Al-Sharq** (Qatari newspaper),
13 July 2020³

In July 2020 the Hagia Sofia (Holy Wisdom) Museum in Istanbul once again returned to the status of a mosque after 86 years of serving as a museum. Originally an Orthodox cathedral (537) it was converted into a mosque following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (1453), but in November 1934 was made a museum by the republican government of Turkey. In 2020 Hagia Sofia had again become the Hagia Sofia Grand Mosque, *Ayasofya-i Kebir Cami*. On 24 July 2020 during the Hagia Sofia re-

¹ This essay adapts material from Amikam Nachmani, *Haunted Presents. Europeans. Muslim immigrants and the onus of European – Jewish histories*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017.

² "Historical Day", editorial, [Al-Watan](#) (Qatari daily), 25 July 2020, reprinted in MEMRI, The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2 AUG 2020, <http://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?5273>

³ Majed al-Ansari, "The opening of the [Hagia Sophia] mosque – a message to the West ...", [Al-Sharq](#) (Qatari daily), 13 JULY 2020, reprinted in MEMRI, The Middle East Media Research Institute, 2 AUG 2020, <http://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/item?5273> Al-Ansari writes a weekly column for [Al-Sharq](#).

conversion ceremony many thousands gathered around it, shouting "Allahu Akbar!", President Erdogan read from the Quran, and Professor Ali Erbaş, Head of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate (*Diyanet*), delivered the Friday sermon with a sword in hand, a tradition practiced by Ottoman sultans in the wake of conquests. Two green flags were hung on the pulpit of the mosque, another symbol of conquest. "The longing of our nation, which has turned into a heartbreak, is coming to an end today", declared Erbaş. The sword corroborated Erbaş's words when he said that the revival of Hagia Sophia to its status as a mosque augured the liberation of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.⁴

Several explanations were given to the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia: that it was a deliberate anti-Christian act; that it was done to enhance Erdogan's status in the Arab and Sunni worlds and as leader of the Muslim *umma*; that it was meant to present Erdogan as defender of the Palestinians and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and as supporter of the Islamic movement within Israel; that it was said to be another move in Turkey's competition with Saudi Arabia for hegemony over the Sunni Muslim world; that it was another Turkish attempt to revive the legacy of the Ottoman Empire; and so on and so forth.⁵

Among other things the re-conversion of Hagia Sofia drew attention to disputed holy places around the world and to attempts to change their status (see below). Simultaneously the re-conversion aroused criticism: that it was falsification of history, that President Erdogan is turning secular Turkey into "a lame version of religious Pakistan"; that it was "an irresponsible act that gives Israel an excuse to turn the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem into the Jewish temple of King Solomon".⁶

It was **The New York Times** that first pointed out that the "specter haunting Europe" today was the migrant, the foreigner, the "other" and his "otherness".⁷ Jack Goody, a renowned British social anthropologist, in the same vein but more specifically noted that " 'A specter is haunting Europe'.

⁴ [Burak Bekdil](https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/turkey-islamism-symbolism/), "Turkey: Islamism's Corrupted Symbolism", [Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies](https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/turkey-islamism-symbolism/), BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,720, 30 August 2020, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/turkey-islamism-symbolism/>; [duvaR.english](https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/07/24/turkeys-top-religious-authority-head-delivers-friday-sermon-at-hagia-sophia-with-a-sword-in-hand/), Turkey's own independent gazette, 24 July 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/07/24/turkeys-top-religious-authority-head-delivers-friday-sermon-at-hagia-sophia-with-a-sword-in-hand/>

⁵ Edy Cohen, "Why Did Erdoğan Convert Hagia Sophia Into a Mosque?", [BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,713](https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/hagia-sophia-mosque-erdogan/), 27 AUG 2020, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/hagia-sophia-mosque-erdogan/>; Taner Akcam, "The debate over Hagia Sofia, the New Republic, Hrant Dink and Tahir Elci", [duvaR.english](https://www.duvarenglish.com/opinion/2020/08/05/the-debate-over-hagia-sophia-the-new-republic-hrant-dink-and-tahir-elci/), Turkey's own independent gazette, 5 AUG 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/opinion/2020/08/05/the-debate-over-hagia-sophia-the-new-republic-hrant-dink-and-tahir-elci/>; Orit Perlov and Galia Lindenstrauss, "The Empire strikes back: the Arab world on the decision to convert Hagia Sofia back into a mosque", Tel Aviv University, The Institute for National Security Studies, [INSS Insight](https://www.inss.org.il/publication/hagia-sophia/), 1350, 21 JULY 2020, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/hagia-sophia/>.

⁶Orit Perlov and Galia Lindenstrauss, *Ibid*.

⁷ Roger Cohen, [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2000/12/25/nyregion/a-specter-is-haunting-europe.html), reprinted in [Ha'aretz](https://www.haaretz.com), 25 December 2000.

This is not the specter of communism ... but rather the specter of Islam and Islamic terrorism".⁸ With relatively secondary coverage (certainly secondary when compared to coverage of Muslim terrorism in urban Europe), Muslim immigrants are blamed for turning churches where Christianity is no longer practiced into mosques, or demand to pray in active and practicing churches that once were mosques ("without any reciprocity in Muslim countries!"), for example in the Cordoba cathedral.⁹

In 1236, during the *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula (8th – 15th century), the Cordoba mosque was consecrated as a Catholic church, and remained so ever since. The Cordoba cathedral was originally a Christian church, the Visigoth Church of San Vicente, built in the year 590 when the Visigoth kingdom ruled the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Muslim invasion. At the beginning of the 8th century Cordoba was captured by the Muslims and the church converted into a mosque (786), though Christians were allowed to pray in it. Between 1236 up until 2004 the Cathedral functioned regularly and used solely by Christians. However, in January 2004 *Al-Qaeda* leader Osama Bin-Laden encouraged Muslims to reconquer Spain for Islam, and titled the Iberian Peninsula "The Lost Al-Andalus". In a speech called "*Message to the Muslim People*", Bin Laden insisted that "No Muslim territory should ever become non-Muslim. ... Let the whole world know that we shall never accept the tragedy of Andalusia". His deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, instructed (September 2007) that "Re-conquering Al-Andalus is the duty of the Islamic nation in general and of you [the *Al-Qaeda* fighters] in particular". (Al-Andalus - - according to some the meaning of the name is "paradise" - - is the Arabic name of those parts of Spain, Portugal and France that were occupied by the Muslim conquerors, the Moors, from 711 to 1492).¹⁰

Indeed, as from the early 2000s Muslims in Spain have lobbied the Roman Catholic Church and petitioned the Holy See and Pope John Paul II to allow them to pray in the Cordoba cathedral. They requested that a space in it will be assigned for Muslim worship, and mentioned that in the past the place was shared by believers from both religions, a precedent of peaceful coexistence that should be repeated. They sought to restore the "spirit of Al-Andalus, where Muslims, Christians and Jews co-existed in relative harmony"; "The Córdoba monument is a lesson in universalism, in how cultures and religions can meet and co-exist ... It would be an exemplary gesture", they wrote. Concurrently they vowed not to forget Al-Andalus: "Al-Andalus will continue being Al-Andalus for Muslims of all ages. It is

⁸ Jack Goody, *Islam in Europe*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 2004, p. 1.

⁹ Matt Carr quoting Christopher Caldwell, in "Christopher Caldwell dissected", review of Christopher Caldwell, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam and the West* (New York, Doubleday, 2009), Institute of Race Relations, 2 July 2009. Carr is extremely critical of Caldwell's theses and does not agree with many of Caldwell's insights and conclusions. See the review <http://www.irr.org.uk/2009/july/ha000011.html>

¹⁰ Soeren Kern, "Ban remains on Muslim prayer in Spanish cathedral", *Gatestone Institute, International Policy Council*, 14 FEB 2013, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3589/cordoba-cathedral-muslim-prayer>

there; we have created it. Here we have our dead, who remain alive, awaiting Resurrection Day".¹¹

In April 2010, on Good Friday, a confrontation erupted between Muslim tourists and the Cordoba cathedral's guards: a group of Muslims from Austria demanded to pray in the cathedral, citing its history as once the world's second biggest mosque. The guards invited the tourists to visit the 24,000 square meters cathedral but forbade them to pray. Notwithstanding the warning the tourists did unroll prayer rugs, kneeled on the floor and began praying. A large brawl developed between the group, the guards and police, and eight tourists were arrested and faced charges of disturbing the peace and using violence. In early 2013 the criminal court of Cordoba acquitted them. Among other reasons the court ruled that a conviction would "do a disservice to freedom of religious thought and respect for the plurality of religions".¹²

"Sharing a Wife Between Two Husbands"

The Bishop of Cordoba Demetrio Fernandes reacted that it is impossible to share a house of worship: "It would be like sharing a wife between two husbands". The Bishop mentioned the Basilica of San Juan in Damascus as an example of a Christian site that has been converted into a mosque: an Umayyad mosque was built in the eight century above a fourth century church said to contain the remains of John the Baptist:

We wouldn't think of asking for the Damascus mosque, because it belongs to the Muslims and for them it is an emblematic place. ... We understand that history doesn't go back. It only goes forward. So, it doesn't make sense to ask for the Cordoba [cathedral] to convert it into a mosque, it doesn't make sense because history is irreversible.¹³

The Bishop portrayed the gloomy scenario that develops the moment a place turns into a joint "mosque – cathedral" (street signs in Cordoba already direct people to the "*mosque – cathedral*"; the place has been defined by UNESCO as World Heritage Site):¹⁴

[A]ny "joint use" of the Catholic cathedral is "a euphemism that means: Catholics, get out!" To this, [Bishop] Fernandez replies: "We will not leave, except if we are kicked out, since for sixteen centuries there has been Christian worship here ... while the

¹¹ Soeren Kern, *ibid*; Isabel Romero, Cordoba's Islamic Association, quoted in Rachel Donadio, "Name Debate Echoes an Old Clash of Faiths", The New York Times, 4 NOV 2010.

¹² Soeren Kern, *op. cit.*

¹³ Atika Shubert, "Muslims in Spain campaign to worship alongside Christians", CNN, 30 AUG 2010; Rachel Donadio, The New York Times, 4 NOV 2010.

¹⁴ Rachel Donadio, The New York Times, 4 NOV 2010.

Muslims have been here but four and a half centuries." He explained in more details: [T]he [B]ishop pointed out that it is important "to know, that **where Muslims pray, no one else may pray**, which is to say, **if I permit Muslims to pray in the Cordoba Cathedral, we could go [out] the day after tomorrow** [pasado mañana]; then, to permit the Muslims to pray in the Cathedral is equivalent to telling Catholics to saying goodbye and good night, and that would be irresponsible" [**equivale para los católicos a decir adiós, buenas noches, y eso sería una irresponsabilidad**]. Bishop Fernandez averred that "**some things may be shared and others are not; and the Cathedral of Cordoba is not to be shared with Muslims.**"¹⁵

Revival of previous religious worships in places that once were founded or owned by other religions is not confined to Christianity or Islam, neither to Cordoba or Damascus, nor to the demand for direct reciprocity (i.e. you let me pray in your place, I will let you pray in mine), but rather involves also sites in third countries. Byzantium's **Hagia Sophia** (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople, now Istanbul - - seat of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the biggest cathedral of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, 537 - 1453; mosque, 1453 - 1931; museum since 1935; the second most visited museum in Turkey after Istanbul's *Top Kapi Palace* - - and the **Bir Seb'a** mosque (Israeli since 1948; now the Museum of Muslim Culture in the Israeli southern town of Be'er Sheva), are also sites where faiths clash and demands are made to revive the past.

The Bir Seb'a Mosque

The Bir Seb'a mosque's history is similar to Hagia Sophia's: a mosque that became a Museum.¹⁶ But at the end of 2012 the Government of Turkey and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) protested (successfully) over a planned wine and beer festival that was to take place at the yard of the Be'er Sheva museum, formerly a 1906 Ottoman era mosque. On the other hand, demands to resume Muslim services in the Mosque were denied. In a similar context Muslim demands for services to be conducted at the Cordoba cathedral were countered by requests to renew Christian worship in *Hagia Sophia*.¹⁷

¹⁵ Quoted in Daniel Pipes, "Mosque in Cordoba, Church in Damascus. Basilica San Juan, Damascus", 26 DEC 2006 (emphases added),

<http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2006/12/mosque-in-cordoba-church-in-damascus>

See also "El obispo de Córdoba: 'Abrir la Mezquita a los musulmanes significa: católicos váyanse'" (The Bishop of Cordoba: 'Open mosque to Muslims means: Catholics go away'), *El Mundo* (Spanish), 14 JUNE 2010.

¹⁶ For more on the Hagia Sophia, the Bir Seb'a mosque and the Be'er Sheva Muslim Culture Museum see Sahni Litman, "Curating the prayers", *Haaretz, Galleria*, 21 DEC 2014.

¹⁷ Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times*, 4 NOV 2010; Ben White, "Be'er Sheva's masquerade", *Aljazeera*, 4 SEPT 2012,

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/09/20129475526951177.html>;

Seth J. Frantzman, "Terra Incognita: The re-Islamification of Beersheba", *The Jerusalem Post*, 5 SEPT 2012.

Also, demand of Jews to pray at the premises of Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, built on the remains of the Jewish Temple in the Temple Mount, is persistently rejected by the Jerusalem Muslim *Wakf* authorities.

The Demand for Reciprocity

The demand for reciprocity- - apparently the Vatican attempts to make reciprocity the cornerstone of its relations with Muslims and to ask for the betterment of rights for the Christians who live in Muslim and Arab countries¹⁸ - - indicates that globally speaking, the present Christian-Muslim encounter is far from being peaceful. "Enough now with this turning the other cheek! It's our duty to protect ourselves ... The West has had relations with the Arab countries for half a century ... and has not been able to get the slightest concession on human rights", complained Monsignor Velasio De Paolis, the then Secretary of the Vatican's Supreme Court.¹⁹

Christians living outside Europe are being massacred (in Africa, Nigeria, the Gaza Strip, Iraq, and more), with the result that Europeans want the entire inter-faith relations to be conducted through "positive tit for tat": Christians should behave properly towards immigrants and Muslims must treat the Christians among them in a better way. Or: "Just as Muslims can build their houses of prayer anywhere in the world, the faithful of other religions should be able to do so as well".²⁰ European authors have compared the rights granted to Muslims in the West and the restrictions imposed on the estimated 40 million Christians in Muslim countries, "an embattled minority, facing an economic decline, dwindling rights, and physical jeopardy ... Most of them are despised and distrusted second-class citizens, facing discrimination in education, jobs and courts".²¹ While mosques proliferate throughout cities in Europe and in other Western locations, practically any expression of non-Islamic religion is strictly forbidden in many Muslim countries. "[T]he way of tolerance, dialogue and multicultural sensitivity can no longer be a one-way street", maintained the Vatican, which has taken a much stronger line under the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI, insisting on reciprocity.²²

¹⁸ Daniel Pipes, "Mosque in Cordoba, Church in Damascus. Basilica San Juan, Damascus", 26 DEC 2006,

<http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/2006/12/mosque-in-cordoba-church-in-damascus>

¹⁹ Daniel Pipes, "Quest for reciprocity. The Vatican Confronts Islam", *Jerusalem Post*, 5 JULY 2006.

²⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, May 2006, and Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran (the Vatican equivalent of Foreign Minister), late 2003, quoted in Daniel Pipes, "Quest for Reciprocity. The Vatican Confronts Islam", *Jerusalem Post*, 5 July 2006.

²¹ Patrick Sookhdeo, Director, The Barnabas Fund, quoted in Daniel Pipes, "Quest for Reciprocity", *ibid.* The Barnabas Fund is a Christian organization established in 1993 to serve the Church and make its needs known to Christians around the world. The Fund is active in more than 40 countries.

²² Richard John Neuhaus, "What Pope Gets Right ...", *TIME*, 27 November 2006, p. 26. Father Richard John Neuhaus is editor in chief of *First Things*, a monthly magazine on religion and culture.

"Christians must love immigrants and Muslims must treat well the Christians among them", was the way the Pope submitted his demand for reciprocity in May 2005.²³ The visit paid by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to the Vatican (November 2007), and his meeting there with Pope Benedict raised the following hope for reciprocity: a similar visit of the Pope in Mecca, where non-Muslims are banned. (Saudi Arabia does not allow the practice of anything but Islam, and its religious police try to make sure that is the case. Saudi Arabia's control on religious matters is defined as "complete").²⁴

Indeed, if the call for reciprocity of the **New York Times**' Thomas Friedman is accepted, it will mean an extremely deep change in Muslim theology:

[I]t is a great thing these two men met, and that King Abdullah [1924 – 2015; king: 2005 – 2015] came bearing gifts. But what would have really caught my attention — and the world's — would have been if King Abdullah had presented the Pope with something truly daring: a visa. You see, the King of Saudi Arabia, also known as the Keeper of the Two Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina, can visit the pope in the Vatican. But the Pope can't visit the king of Saudi Arabia in the Vatican of Islam — Mecca. Non-Muslims are not allowed there. Moreover, it is illegal to build a church, a synagogue or a Hindu or Buddhist temple in Saudi Arabia, or to practice any of these religions publicly. As [had been noted by the BBC], "some Christian worship services are held secretly, but the government has been known to crack down on them, or deport Filipino workers if they hold even private services. ... The Saudi authorities cite a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad that only Islam can be practiced in the Arabian Peninsula". ... I wished the pope had publicly expressed a desire to visit Saudi Arabia, and that the king would now declare: "Someone has to chart a new path for our region. If I can meet the Pope in the Vatican, I can host Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Shiite and Buddhist religious leaders for a dialogue in our sacred house. Why not? We are secure in our own faith. Let us all meet as equals."

Why not?²⁵

²³ Pope Benedict the XVI, quoted in Daniel Pipes, "Quest for reciprocity. The Vatican Confronts Islam", Jerusalem Post, July 5, 2006.

²⁴ Greg Botelho, "Amid killings and kidnappings, can Christianity survive in the Middle East?", CNN, 27 FEB 2015.

²⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, "Democracy's Root: Diversity", The New York Times, 11 November 2007.



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