



Thursday June 25th 2020

Dear President Erdoğan,

Please accept my sincere apologies for this unsolicited letter – I appreciate the calls on your time, but I hope very much that you will feel able to take a moment to consider my comments.

I write as a long-term friend of Turkey and as someone who has worked there regularly for many years as an archaeologist and historian. I have no connection with the church or any political groupings in Turkey, and I write entirely on my own behalf and of my colleagues in the field of history in my capacity as President of the International Association of Byzantine Studies (representing scholars, students and teachers in over 40 different countries worldwide). I have always appreciated the hospitality, friendliness and welcoming attitude of ordinary Turkish people, both in cities such as İstanbul and Ankara or smaller cities such as Trabzon or Erzurum, as well as in the countryside and provinces where a good deal of my work has been located – regions such as Çorum, for example, and the small village communities among whom I have worked.

I say all this in order to underline the fact that I am deeply sympathetic to the need for Turkey to establish its own path, both politically as well as culturally, in our modern globalized world, as well as to emphasize my appreciation of Turkish cultural traditions – both religious and secular – history, and people. In spite of the damage inflicted on its cultural heritage through European colonialism and cultural imperialism in the 19th and first part of the 20th c, Turkey has developed a well-established and internationally-admired tradition of cultural conservation as well as a recognized tradition of intellectual and cultural openness which does it great credit. The measures taken by Turkish governments over the last fifty or more years to protect this heritage and at the same time to foster international scholarly collaboration and co-operation have been admirable and have made possible significant advances in understanding the history of Turkey, of the Turkish people, of Turkey's landscape and resources, and Turkey's contribution to the management of internationally-significant cultural heritage.

In my current position as President of the International Association of Byzantine Studies, therefore, you will understand my concern with regard to the current and future plans for the Aya Sofya in İstanbul, not because I have any broader objection to – or indeed have any right to be critical of - the religious policies of your government and party, nor indeed because I believe there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to treat buildings of great antiquity and cultural historical importance. To the contrary, my concern is to emphasize that Turkey is home to many historical cultures, each of which plays its part in its modern identity, each of which contributes to the multi-faceted and dynamic culture of Turkey and the Turkish people.

It is important, therefore, to value each of these elements for their own sake and to be willing to recognize their varying contributions to the whole. This is a strength, not a weakness – indeed, variety is a crucial ingredient in a lively and dynamic culture such as that of Turkey. Leaving the Aya Sofya as a museum, recognizing its role in the past as a place of worship both as mosque and church, and allowing visitors – both Turks and non-Turks – to appreciate this complex past, fosters at the same time a better understanding of the past and how the present came to be.

Of course, there are also scientific arguments to be made about the architectural and political history of this building, but I wanted to bring to your attention these broader issues, in the hope that you might consider the value of keeping the Aya Sofya as a museum – in this form I believe it accomplishes far more for Turkey and Turks as a nation than would otherwise be the case. And maintaining its current status recognizes publicly and internationally the tolerance and openness that lies at the heart of Islam.

With the greatest respect, I remain

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Haldon', with a long, sweeping underline.

John F. Haldon

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