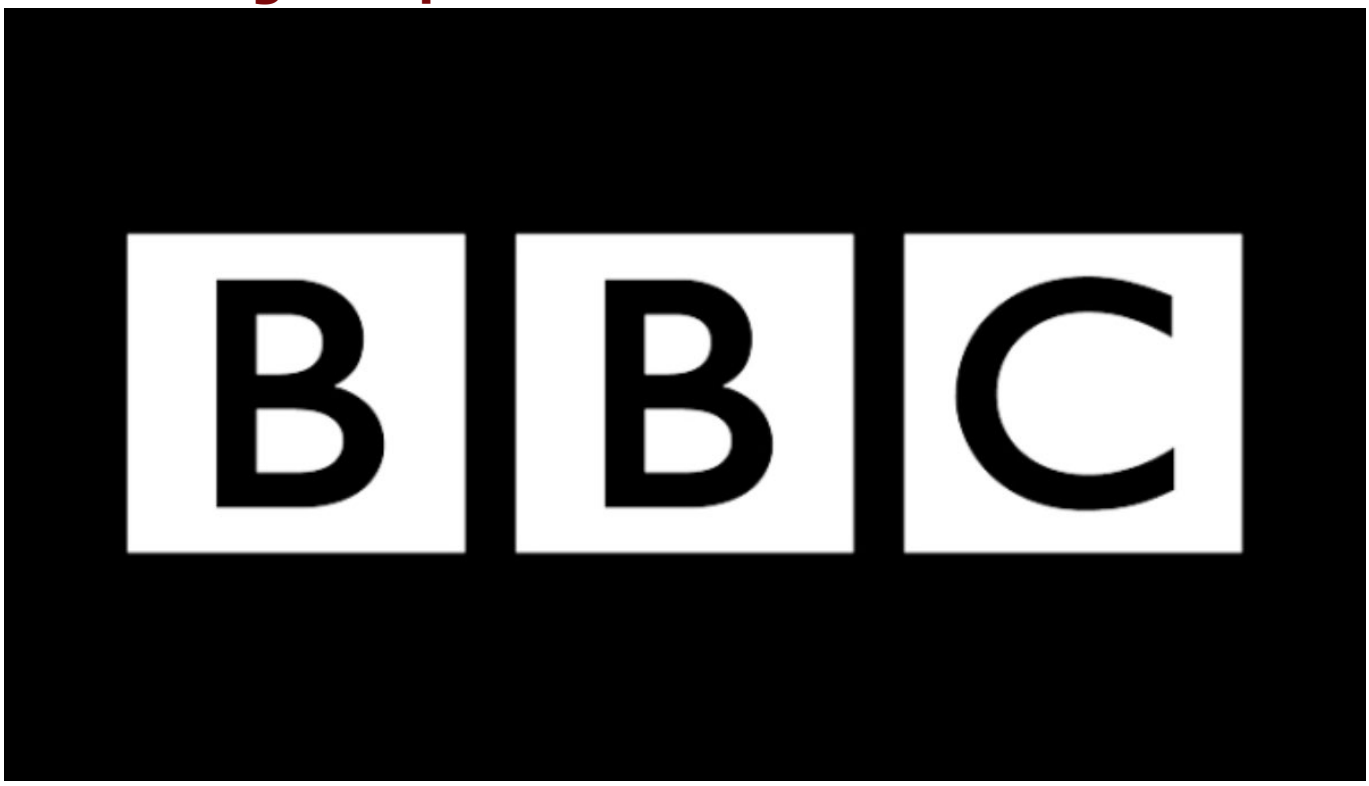
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Archbishop Elpidophoros Interview with BBC about Hagia Sophia



This weekend, His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros was interviewed by the BBC's Julian Marshall concerning the conversation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Below is a transcript of the interview. The full audio interview can be found at the 18 minute mark at https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w172x2yry6lvsmj

Julian Marshall: When Hagia Sophia was originally built in the 6th Century, during the Byzantine Empire, it served as the seat of the Greek Orthodox Church. And when Turkey was considering converting it back from a museum into a mosque, the Greek Orthodox Synod said such a change would provoke strong protest and frustration among Christians worldwide and harm Turkey itself.

Archbishop Elpidophoros is the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in the US, but grew up in Istanbul, before he and the rest of his Greek family left the country after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. I asked him what were his memories of Hagia Sophia?

Archbishop Elpidophoros: When you enter this really magnificent monument, it's impressive for everyone, but it bears special feelings for any Christian,

especially for Orthodox who are more directly connected with that monument, since this was always in the history, the center of our faith and of our church. We are all so happy that it is well preserved and it is respected, by all faiths and religions and people.

JM: And you fear that is going to change, if Hagia Sophia is to become a mosque again?

AE: The reason that Ataturk, who is the founder of the modern secular Turkish Republic, converted the previous church and then mosque to a museum, the reason is that he wanted to keep Hagia Sophia as the sign of the transition from a theocratic empire from a conqueror mentality, to the equal citizenship in a secular society, in a secular state. That is the significance of Hagia Sophia. Being guided by a mentality of the conqueror, and claiming conqueror's rights, to have this place as a mosque, this changes the relationship of the state to its citizens.

I am a Turkish citizen myself, and I don't want the state to have the mindset of the conqueror, because I am not a conquered minority, I want to feel in my own country as an equal citizen, no matter if I am Christian, of Greek origin or Armenian or Syrian or Jewish, we all are equal citizens. But, if the state is endorsing the mentality of the conqueror, saying it's my conquered right to have Hagia Sophia as a mosque, then this is a dangerous path, we don't know where it can guide us, and this is my fear.

JM: Are you perhaps, Archbishop, reading too much into this? Is it not as straightforward, does the Turkish Government simply wanting this to be a mosque again, and allowing people of all faiths to continue to visit it?

AE: The visiting is not the problem at all, it has always been an open place to visit. If it is the right of every Turkish citizen, to access this monument and pray in it, then why is it only valid for Muslim Turkish citizens, because not every Turkish citizen is a Muslim?

JM: But Archbishop, there is nothing to stop you and your Greek Orthodox co-religionists entering this building and silently praying in front of these centuries-old icons?

AE: We are talking about worship, worship is not a personal issue, it's a collective, it's a service. As a museum, we all could have access and pray, everybody, equally without any exception. We could all pray in that church. In a mosque, it's impossible. There is a certain ritual to enter a mosque. You have to take off your shoes, you have to wash your hands, you have to be a Muslim to pray. You cannot

enter the Blue Mosque for example, and pray; you can’t pray in the Blue Mosque as a Christian.

JM: So, if you believe the Turkish Government has another agenda in reconverting the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, where is Turkey heading?

AE: There are so many beautiful and big mosques in Istanbul, the necessity to reconvert Hagia Sophia to mosque is not comprehensible by our side. And it hurts the feeling of all Orthodox, countries and people all around the world, and I dare to say of all Christians.

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