

# FREE AGIA SOPHIA COUNCIL OF AMERICA

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Chris Spirou, President

January, 11 2010

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Ankara, Turkey

Your Excellency Prime Minister Erdoğan,

As you very well know, the government of Switzerland has begun the process of prohibiting the building of minarets adjoining the Muslim mosques located on its soil, consonant with the popular will as expressed in the recent referendum in that country.

This development is a flagrant violation of human rights and of religious freedom as these values are understood in all civilized countries.

If this racist outcome of the Swiss referendum is implemented as a national policy in Switzerland, you can be sure, Prime Minister Erdoğan, that the next national referendum in Switzerland may be to give the government the right to determine the appropriate interior appearance of the mosques in Switzerland.

And of course, once that provision is implemented, the government of Switzerland may well assume the right to appoint the Imam of each mosque, and other Muslim religious leaders set the condition of his citizenship, determine his religious dress code, and specify his religious obligations.

The way things are going in Switzerland these days as they pertain to the freedom of religious expression, the Muslim faithful in Switzerland will soon be under the same dire straits as our Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters are today in your country.

I don't need to tell you, Mr. Prime Minister, that for centuries Ottoman Turkish sultans, and later Turkey's political leaders, have determined the use of Christian holy places; have set the prerequisites for and appointed Orthodox Christian Patriarchs; have imposed citizenship requirements for Orthodox Christian religious leaders; have determined the public dress code of Orthodox Christian clerics and have set the parameters for Orthodox Christian religious activities.

I hate to say it, Prime Minister Erdoğan, but the recent political decision in Switzerland as it relates to free religious expression by the Muslim faithful in that country has all the trappings of the restrictive practices imposed by your

Ottoman ancestors and their political successors on the Orthodox Christian community in Turkey.

These utterly uncivilized, punitive and discriminatory policies of the Turkish state imposed on the Orthodox Christian Faith in Turkey, are the policies which prompted Patriarch Bartholomew I to state in a recent interview on “60-Minutes,” a television program broadcast by the CBS television network in the United States, that “in Turkey I feel that I am being crucified daily.”

To witness the result of an unconscionable governmental policy, I urge you, Prime Minister Erdoğan, to visit the office of his All Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Christian Faith, whom the Turkish government demeaningly refers to as the “Roman Patriarch of the City,” Bartholomew I. There, behind Patriarch Bartholomew, hangs not the icon of Jesus Christ as it would in every other free Christian Patriarchate or Diocese in the world, but the portrait of former and now deceased President of Turkey, General Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

When I inquired as to why the portrait of Kemal Ataturk hangs behind the desk of the Orthodox Christian Patriarch, I was told “because it’s the law in Turkey. The Orthodox Christian Patriarchate in Istanbul is a Turkish state institution.”

Prime Minister Erdoğan, you know better than anyone else that the greatest injustice in the world is the one cloaked in the word *law*.

Prime Minister Erdoğan, following the decision of the voters in Switzerland to impose religious restrictions on the Muslim Faith in that country, the Board of Directors of the “International Congregation of Agia Sophia,” the “Free Agia Sophia Council of America,” and the “Free Agia Sophia Council of Europe” voted to offer all the support necessary to the Muslim community in Switzerland in its efforts to reverse the racist and discriminatory result of the recent referendum.

Our Councils unanimously support the Muslim faithful of Switzerland in their defense of human rights and freedom of religious expression.

Our Councils strongly agree with the leaders of the Muslim Faith who have condemned the involvement of public officials in Switzerland in the affairs of religion. And we fully endorse the Vatican’s position that the action taken by the political leaders in Switzerland to restrict religious freedoms is a “bomb in the foundations of religious freedom.”

Further, we commend the response of your government and the call by your Minister for Governmental Affairs for Muslims to “boycott” the financial institutions in Switzerland. Your Minister has urged Muslims to withdraw their money from Swiss banks and “deposit it in Turkish bank accounts.”

We certainly hope, Prime Minister Erdoğan, that the call for a boycott is a matter of conscience in support of the restoration of the rights of the Muslim faithful in Switzerland and not a Turkish ploy motivated by crass commercial interests.

Mr. Prime Minister, believing in your personal commitment to human rights and equality, we ask that the Government of Turkey, consistent with the demands it has rightly made regarding the human rights of the Muslim faithful in Switzerland, agree once and for all to stop violating the human rights and the freedom of religious expression of the Orthodox Christians in Turkey; stop appointing Orthodox Christian Patriarchs and other Orthodox religious leaders; stop imposing citizenship requirements on Orthodox Christian clerics; stop defining acceptable Orthodox Christian religious behavior; stop requiring secular public dress codes for Orthodox Christian priests; and stop interfering in the administration and operations of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Christian Church in Istanbul.

Finally, Prime Minister Erdoğan, I wish to remind you of the official invitation extended to you by the "International Congregation of Agia Sophia" to be our honored guest in the first "Free at Last" Holy Liturgy Service in Agia Sophia in 557 years which, as you know, will be held on September 17, 2010.

Prime Minister Erdoğan, when you and I enter the Holy Church of Agia Sophia on September 17, 2010, we shall forever put an end to the arbitrary and tyrannical decisions of political leaders who determine the use of holy places, appoint religious leaders, decide religious dress codes, and set rules for the conduct of religious activities.

And by our action on September 17, 2010, Prime Minister Erdoğan, we will, together, send a clear message to the political leaders in Switzerland and elsewhere that governments have no business interfering in religious affairs other than to protect the basic human right to the freedom of religious expression for all people.

Mr. Prime Minister, I wish you a happy and healthy New Year and look forward to seeing you on September 17, 2010, in Istanbul.

Sincerely yours,



Chris Spirou, President  
International Congregation of Agia Sophia