Opinion

Guest Voices



Muslims pray at the Ottoman-era Sultan Ahmed or Blue Mosque, in Istanbul, Turkey, Nov. 21, 2025, ahead of the visit of Pope Leo XIV to Turkey. (AP/Francisco Seco)



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On Nov. 27 Pope Leo XIV landed in Türkiye — a country I call home and to which I have taken many Christian students to explore our shared religious history. When Christian students see Nicaea, modern-day İznik, they always seem a bit disappointed that the site that looms so large in the history of Christianity is so small. Other aspects surprise them too, including the long Muslim connections to the place, which highlights the history of Christian-Muslim understanding the town represents.

The Hagia Sophia of İznik, built a century after the grander Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, shares much of the Istanbul sanctuary's history.

Originally a Byzantine basilica, the Hagia Sophia in İznik serves today as a place of prayer for Muslims that still honors its Christian past. Ottoman-era restorers protected the walls, repaired collapsed sections, added a prayer niche and a pulpit — the mihrab and minbar that are two standard elements of a mosque — but allowed much of the earlier architecture to remain visible. This coexistence of architectural and spiritual layers offers a natural setting for interfaith dialogue, as the same walls have resounded with centuries of worship in both traditions.

This Islamic stewardship of a Christian heritage site, showing respect for the sacredness of the place, even after the community's faith identity shifted, reminds me of Prophet Muhammad's early example of interfaith fellowship, when he welcomed a Christian delegation from Najran in Southern Arabia into his mosque in Medina. The two communities exchanged their theological convictions regarding Jesus and Mary and listened to each other with respect and civility. Though the two sides didn't come to an agreement, the Christians offered their prayers in the mosque before departing.

These stories of holy encounter need to be told and known more. They represent the Quranic mandate to preserve churches, monasteries and synagogues while still holding to one's own beliefs:

> Those who have been driven unjustly from their homes only for saying, ‘Our Lord is God.' If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed. God is sure to help those who help His cause — God is truly All-Powerful and Almighty.

This passage establishes the divine principle, and Muslim duty, of protecting all places of worship where God's name is mentioned. The verse underpins the Islamic legal tradition of safeguarding the religious freedom of non-Muslims in Muslim lands exemplified by Caliph Umar, who ensured the security of Christian churches and their communities after the conquest of Jerusalem.

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The early Ottoman period was not a paradise of equality. New church construction was restricted but was not impossible. Special permission had to be granted. Yet it was remarkable at the time that the Ottoman regime allowed established church structures to be preserved. Across 600 years and three continents, the Ottoman Empire saw the construction or reconstruction of thousands of churches. Conversions of major churches to mosques did occur, like the great Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, but many local churches continued to operate.

The largest wave of church-building occurred in the 18th and especially the 19th century under the so-called Tanzimat reforms, when Christian communities enjoyed greater freedom and prosperity.

Christians and Muslims have as a result lived mostly amicably in Türkiye for centuries. The Ottoman Empire developed a system in which religious communities were able to exist with relative stability. Christians and Jews were organized into "millets": They had their own religious leaders, ran their own schools and courts for personal-status matters and established their own charities. They were generally free to practice their faith openly.

This gave religious minorities a structured, predictable place in Ottoman society. One important Muslim figure of the early 20th century, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, approached Christian communities to collaborate and cooperate with Muslims for the common good.

Regrettably, this shared history is not taught sufficiently in our educational institutions, and therefore we suffer from historical amnesia. One of the aims in the Fellowship for Teachers, developed at the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, is to create opportunities for local educators to awaken students to the contributions that religious diversity makes to civic life. But much more can be done to use our rich sacred past to inform our present, and shape a future in which all our communities can grow and thrive together.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in Turkey and Lebanon** feature series. View the full series.