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The Burning Mosque

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THE BURNING MOSQUE

The response of Arab leaders to the fire in one of Islam’s most vener- 
ed mosques compelled three members of the Institute of Judaeo-
Christian Studies to release a plea for justice. A shortened version of 
this statement was published as a letter to the Editor of The New 
York Times on September 10, 1969. This plea was written by Msgr. 
Oesterreicher and co-signed by Fr. Flannery and Sr. Rose Thering, O.P.

THE burning of Jerusalem’s Al-Aksa Mosque on August twenty-first 
moves us to make the following statement:

The fire is a catastrophe that should concern every man who keeps 
a sense of the sacred and clings to justice. He must condemn the deed. 
Thus, we feel in conscience bound to brand this deed publicly as a 
crime, no matter who set the fire. Happy though we are that the 
mosque did not burn down, and that on the day after the fire regular 
prayers could be resumed, this does not mitigate the disaster. Nor does 
the report that the arsonist was a muddle-headed Christian lessen our 
sorrow.

It would be premature to discuss, much less judge, the motives of 
the alleged arsonist as long as the court has not spoken. A man to 
whom justice is dear will wait till the committee of Muslim notables 
and the commission of inquiry appointed by the Israeli Chief Justice 
at the request of his government—in whose impartiality we have full 
confidence—have published their findings.

To ignore the existence of the bodies of investigation and pronounce 
on the responsibility for the calamity violates all rules of fairness. Yet, 
without a shred of evidence, the King of Morocco called the fire 
"Israel’s barbarity," while the Lebanese President spoke of it as a 
"threat to heaven and to earth." The real threat to heaven and earth 
is the call by the kings of Saudi-Arabia and Jordan as well as the 
President of Egypt for the waging of a "Holy War" against Israel. We 
are sure they have not counted the cost. Should their warmongering 
not be halted, Arab propaganda will find it increasingly more difficult 
to persuade the West that Arab leaders and masses are guided by a 
desire for justice, and not by rancor and hatred.

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How empty the charge against Israel is becomes clear when two points are remembered: (1) During Jordan’s nineteen years of occupation of the Old City of Jerusalem, not only one house of prayer was gravely damaged—all synagogues were desecrated or even destroyed. This puts Arab indignation into question. (2) The fire in the mosque by no means indicates Israel’s inability to guard the holy sites of Jerusalem. In their respect for the religious convictions of Christians and Muslims, the Israelis have left the protection of holy sites in the hands of the respective communities. Thus, the mosque is administered and guarded by the appropriate Muslim authorities. Now, if negligence enabled the arsonist to do his job, it was not Jewish negligence but rather that of the Muslim watchmen.

There is, of course, every reason for distress in Arabic-speaking lands, but none for the present furor. There is even less reason for war. The Koran, which praises the participants of a holy war and promises them divine mercy, has these words: “Fight for the sake of Allah those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. Allah does not love the aggressors” (Fourth Surah). In the light of this pronouncement, the message of the President of Egypt defies comprehension: “In the coming battle, [the Arab soldiers] will not be soldiers of their country alone, but soldiers of God and protectors of His religion, holy places, and holy books.” This is a horrifying misuse of the Divine Name.

Together with men of good will everywhere, we implore the Arab leaders to refrain from incendiary speeches or gestures. We also plead with the Israeli government to preserve the calm with which it has so far answered all the unfounded accusations of its complicity in the burning. A war in the Middle East may end in a bloodbath. This is a horrible thought. It is doubly horrible when one remembers that war is not inevitable, and that peace and cooperation could lead the Arabic-speaking states as well as Israel to unheard-of prosperity.

We hope Israel will emerge from the present trial not only intact but inwardly strengthened. We also hope that the Arab statesmen will learn that their great political opportunity is not on the battlefield but at the conference table.