Repairing Our Sacred Spaces

Coming Together After the Notre Dame and Al-aqsa Fires

The world watched as the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burned in a disastrous inferno that destroyed its spire and severely damaged its roof. Nearly 3,000 miles away, the Al-aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem dealt with an apparently accidental fire of its own.

The Al-aqsa fire received much less attention in the news—and caused far less damage—but the tragic burning of the 984-year-old mosque and 856-year-old cathedral draws our attention to the two important sites in the Islamic world and Christendom and provides an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to reflect on their common humanity and assist each other in the repairing of sacred spaces.

Perhaps after Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome, Notre Dame is probably the most revered cathedral in the world. Al-aqsa is the third holiest mosque in Islam, behind Al-masjid al-haram in Mecca and Al-masjid an-nabawi in Medina.

Thankfully, two of the Catholic holy relics in Notre Dame— the crown of thorns and the fragment of the cross—survived the devastating blaze. The Al-aqsa, which was built on the Temple Mount, known as Haram esh-sharif to Muslims, reportedly sustained damage to a single mobile guard booth.

The significance of the two fires pushes us beyond the mere structure of the buildings. Al-aqsa and Notre Dame symbolize the challenges and hopes for Christians and Muslims in their respective histories. Notre Dame is an iconic symbol of Christianity on the European continent and the seat of the archbishop of Paris. Al-aqsa is the place where Muslims believe Prophet Muhammad was transported during his night journey. It may not be the most impressive mosque in the world, but it represents the permanent symbol of the Islamic faith in the Holy Land.

For centuries, Notre Dame was the prize of foreign, revolutionary and secular forces that pressured the church to bend to their will. After Pope Alexander III laid the first stone in 1163, the church witnessed the crowning of King Henry VI of England (as king of France) in 1431, an infiltration by the Huguenots in the 1540s, an assault in the 1790s by French revolutionaries, who rededicated Notre Dame to the Cult of Reason, and of course the rise of Nazism and World War II. Notre Dame was also where Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself emperor and Pope Pius X beatified the French hero Joan of Arc in 1909.
Notre Dame managed to stand tall through it all. The building represents much more than Christian identity—it serves as a reminder of the French people’s perseverance and aspirations for their country, as well as humanity and Christendom.

A similar symbolism holds true for Muslims and their connection to Al-aqsa. The mosque is much more than a place that holds the five daily prayers. Like Notre Dame, Al-aqsa has a complex history of religious tension, warfare and occupation. Originally built by Umar ibn al-khattab, the second caliph of Islam, on the grounds of a former Byzantine building, Al-aqsa was imagined as a continuation and perfection of Judaism and Christianity. Several Muslim dynasties, from the Umayyads to the Abbasids to the Shiite Fatimids, had control over Al-aqsa in the early centuries of the Islamic empire.

In the 11th century, the Seljuk Turks, a Sunni group from Central Asia, seized control of the mosque, only to lose it to the Crusaders who invaded from western Europe. In the early 16th century, the Ottoman Sultan Selim I invaded Jerusalem and conquered the Mamluks, and the Ottoman Turks maintained control until World War I, when Jerusalem was then handed over to the British Empire. Today, Al-aqsa rests on Israeli-occupied territory, a cause of much tension for Palestinian Muslims, as well as the wider ummah, or Muslim world.

The fire at Al-aqsa, however small by comparison, ignites feelings among Muslims that are similar to the feelings of Christians who watched the inferno at Notre Dame Cathedral. The holy sites capture the diversity of Christianity and Islam, as well as the good and the bad of our common humanity. They symbolize the battle-ground of civilizations, the glories of revolutions and the emergence of nation-states and empires, as well as the struggle for liberty and independence among oppressed peoples.

The fires provide an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to reflect upon the importance of worship, as well as the achievements of those who came before them. Perhaps more important, Christians and Muslims have a chance to support each other as they work to repair their sacred spaces. Christians and Muslims have a lot more in common than belief in the monotheistic tradition or the ability to pray in some of the world’s most glorious places of worship. They both struggle, grieve, hope and pray, as so many humans do, during times of strife.

O’Craig Considine, a Catholic American of Irish and Italian descent, is based at the Department of Sociology at Rice University. Considine is the author of Islam in America: Exploring the Issues (July; ABC-CLIO), as well as Muslims in America: Examining the Facts and Islam, Race, and Pluralism in the Pakistani Diaspora. The views expressed in this article are the author’s own.

The holy sites capture the diversity of Christianity and Islam, as well as our common humanity.