

MOUNT OF CONFLICT

By *Walter Zander*

Moslem and Jewish religious leaders recently exchanged charges at a conference in Louvain over the status of Moslem holy places in Jerusalem. Dr WALTER ZANDER examines the facts and makes a suggestion to help reduce local tensions

The situation is fundamentally different from that of the Christian Holy Places. Christians and Jews do not lay religious claims on each other's sanctuaries. But Jews and Moslems hold the same area, the Temple Mount, holy to their own communities.

No agreement exists between them on how to deal with this situation and no rules have been imposed by government or international authority. The prevailing arrangements, therefore, are complex and in parts contradictory.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel, in accordance with tradition, has declared the whole area, except the Western Wall, out of bounds to any Jew "owing to the sacredness of the place." At present, the Israel Government keeps the entry into the Temple area through the Moors Gate, above the Western Wall, open to all without regard to their religion, except on Fridays and Moslem festivals, when only Moslems are admitted.

However, it leaves the administration of and the control over admissions into the buildings of the two mosques, El-Aksa and the Dome of the Rock, which stand within the enclosure, entirely to the Islamic authorities.

Both buildings are meticulously respected, and Israel cannot be charged with any violation of their sacred character.

This, however, is not the full answer. To Moslems, mosques are not isolated buildings. The whole Temple area, the Haram Al-Sharif, comprising the buildings of the mosques, the courtyards and the smaller religious buildings within the enclosure, is considered one indivisible sacred unit, like the Temples of old with their outcourts and porches around the Holy of Holies.

Any entry into the enclosure by a non-Moslem, whether Jew or Christian, which is not authorised by Islamic officials, is regarded by them as a violation of their Sanctuary; and this has been universally recognised throughout the centuries.

Notwithstanding the warnings of the Chief Rabbinate, individual Jews have claimed in the courts the "historic right" of entering the Temple area and praying there. This has not been contested by the Government, although it does not permit prayer meetings within the area.

This "right has also been recognised in principle by the Supreme Court of Israel, according to Jewish law, in the famous "Temple Mount case," subject to suitable arrangements for the maintenance of peace and order to avoid conflict with the Moslem population.

But rights granted by Jewish law are not necessarily valid in the context of Islam, and to Moslems an unauthorised entry into the sacred enclosure remains a violation of the Sanctuary. In this respect the charge raised in Louvain appears justified.

The Israel Government has changed its attitude in this matter twice. After the fire in the El-Aksa Mosque, in August 1969, admission of non-Moslems into the enclosure was suspended. In October of the same year it was restored.

The Moslem Council protested bitterly against this - "the whole of the Haram compound is a mosque, all of it is holy" - adding that they did not intend to prevent believers in other religions from visiting the area, but insisted that the Council alone had the right to open it.

Today, religious questions have become very important issues in the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is suggested, therefore, that the matter be reconsidered. The writer of this article believes that the state of affairs should be restored which existed between August and October 1969, entrusting the Islamic authorities with control of admission into the enclosure.

Two conditions would be essential: first, that Jews and Christians be admitted on equal terms; secondly, that the existing security arrangements be maintained in force, in the interest of both Jews and Arabs alike.

The proposed measure would not affect the issue of sovereignty. But it would show respect for Moslem religious convictions and might thus help to reduce tensions at what is a most inflammable danger-point.