

Haj - A mission of peace

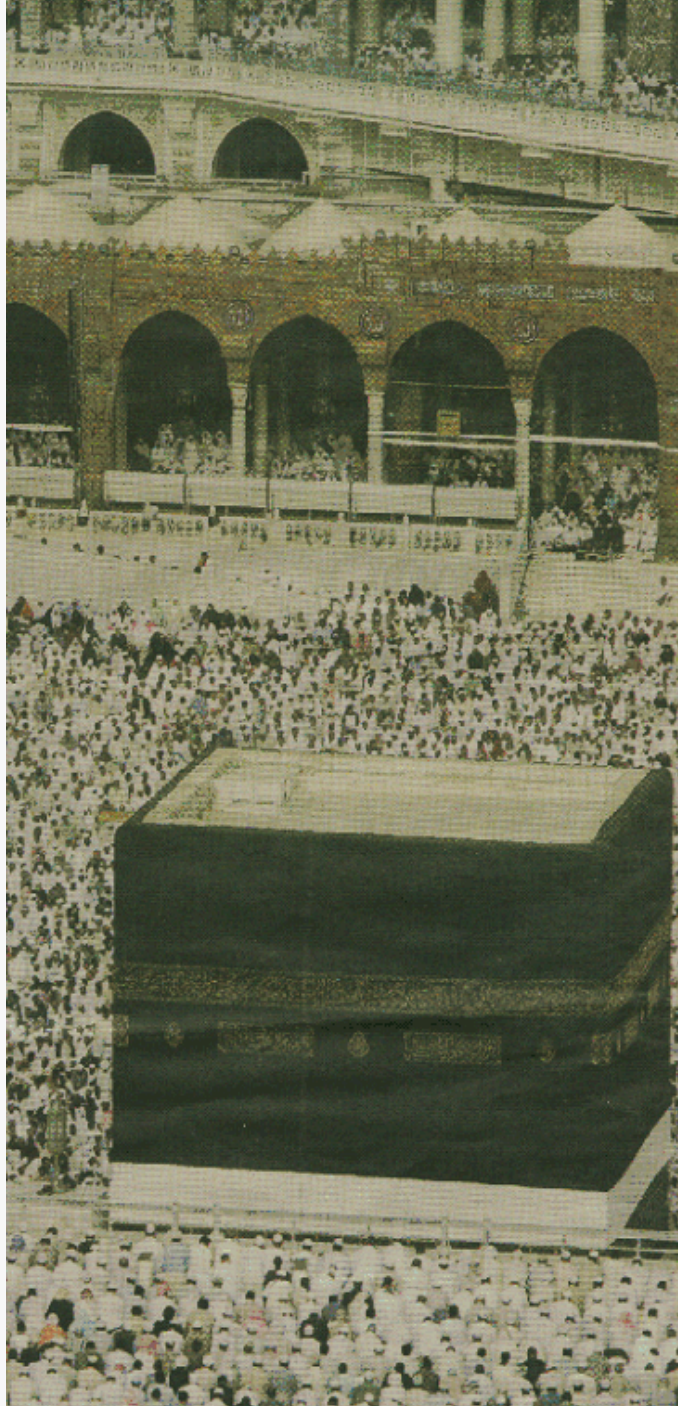
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Article

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During the haj, every pilgrim is on the same plane, regardless of wealth or status

THE world saw, at Mecca last week, what could easily be the largest demonstration of fellowship in one place.



JOURNEY OF PEACE: Pilgrims praying around the Kaaba inside the Grand Mosque, Islam's holiest shrine, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, earlier this month.

Here is where Islam presented its face of peace to the international community in a practical way, especially after the 9-11 tragedy, and the ensuing "war on terrorism".

Never before had the image of Islam suffered so much as in recent times. It does not matter if the root word for "Islam" comes from salam which means "peace".

Or the fact that there are many more "peaceful" Muslims among the billion over followers of the world's three great semitic religions.

There is evidence that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in some parts of Europe where it has almost certainly become the largest organised religion, observed Ian Buruma, a professor of human rights, democracy, and new-media studies, in a column (The Guardian, Jan 7) recently.

Even the unsympathetic Bernard Lewis acknowledged in the New Yorker (June 14, 2004): "Islam is one of the world's great religions.

"Let me be explicit about what I, as a historian of Islam who is not a Muslim, mean by that. Islam has brought comfort and peace of mind to countless millions of men and women.

"It has given dignity and meaning to drab and impoverished lives. It has taught people of different races to live in brotherhood and people of different creeds to live side by side in reasonable tolerance.

"It inspired a great civilisation in which others, besides Muslims, lived creative and useful lives and which, by its achievement, enriched the whole world."

Unfortunately, unlike the consequences of violence and terror attacks, such testimonies hardly register any impact.

Not in the way violence is being regularly portrayed in the media of late. But in many other ways, last week's pilgrimage could make a difference if it is properly understood and presented.

After all, an estimated 2.5 million Muslims from all corners of the world converge on Mecca for the haj which means "to set out for a place", in this case to Islam's holiest city.

As one of the five tenets of Islam, the haj is to be performed once in a lifetime by able-bodied Muslims with the means for the journey.

The rite, as prescribed by the Prophet Muhammad, was mentioned in the Quranic verse: "And pilgrimage to the House is a duty on mankind (owed) to Allah for whoever can find a way there." (3:196).

The "House" referred to is the Holy Kaabah, sometimes inaccurately called "the sacred black stone". In fact, the Kaabah marked the foundation of the first House of worship built explicitly for that purpose.

This was way back during the time of Prophet Ibrahim and his son Ismail as related in the Quran: "And remember when Ibrahim and Ismail laid the foundation of the House (of worship)." (2:127).

Reportedly, during the time, the Kaabah was about 4.5 metres of bare wall and without a roof. The present black appearance is due to the colour of the drape (kiswah) around it, a practice which was started some 220 years before the birth of Prophet Muhammad.

Despite the Kaabah being destroyed once by floods, generally major renovations to the structure have always been resisted, except for minor unimportant ones.

What is of significance, however, is not so much the structural appearance of the Kaabah as compared to its chosen site to serve as the universal direction for prayers for all Muslims worldwide.

More emphatic is the tradition of the haj as an age-old practice since the days of Ibrahim and Ismail as ordained by God.

It is worthwhile noting that Prophet Ibrahim is the fountainhead of Judaism, Christianity and Islam where the practice of pilgrimage is not new.

As recorded in the Quran (2:200), the haj is for the remembrance of God as a sign of piety, purity, simplicity and austerity.

Pilgrims must set out to purify themselves of all worldly pollution and desires, and abstain from gross behaviour and indecent acts.

They are to refrain from killing any animals and destroying plants while performing the haj, so too idle talk oversleeping or just lazing around. Recitations of the Holy Quran, prayers and meditation are encouraged instead.

The overarching aim is to create a harmonious atmosphere at all levels so that peace will reign supreme for the humble remembrance and submission to God.

All these are carried out in the state of ihraam, that is, when all pilgrims wear a simple unstitched garment in

white.

The garb resembles the shroud that all Muslims will be wrapped in for their eventual last rites. It also epitomises the state of "death" to any worldly wants and needs.

In this state, they are forbidden to indulge in many worldly acts such as the use of scented perfume, cutting of nails and hair, or wearing any undergarments or some types of footwear, ornaments and jewellery and watches.

All these must be complied with for as long as one remains in ihraam, that is, before the haj is over.

The ihraam, thus, is a defined state of utmost purity and at peace with only God in total submission.

In other words, in every respect, every pilgrim is on the same plane regardless of his wealth or status.

Wearing the same garments, and following the same code and rites, it reinforces the message that all humans stand equal before the eyes of God and fellow humans.

At once, all other physical and outward differences vanish. Any untoward feeling must be curbed.

For ultimately the haj is a spiritual journey that must reawakens the self in anticipation for the next life based on humility, repentance, sacrifice and righteous deeds.

This is much the same for Prophet Ibrahim, who is regarded as the "friend" of God because of his obedience and untiring devotion towards God and His commandments.

Even when commanded to sacrifice his own son, Ismail, he complied willingly. This gesture is one of the highpoints of the haj, where all pilgrims offer similar sacrifices symbolically.

Therein God in the Quran clarifies, viz, "The flesh and blood of animals does not reach Allah, but what reaches Him (is the spirit of) your piety." (22:31).

With proper understanding, the haj invariably stands as a true reflection of what Islam stands for in a practical way. It is therefore difficult to see how hatred and violence could be allowed to colour Islam as the religion of peace.

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