

Leave God out of the Haj carnage

Andrew Anthony, Tuesday February 3, 2004, [The Guardian](#)

Listening to a report last Saturday on From Our Own Correspondent, I heard John Simpson describe the Haj as a "superbly organised" event. I remember thinking that this was an odd choice of phrase. It's true that the pilgrimage to Mecca is the largest annual gathering of humans in the world, with more than two million Muslims arriving in Saudi Arabia from around the globe. And therefore just housing and feeding that number of people is in itself an achievement. But despite the impressive manner in which a major conurbation's worth of people are moved in and out of the Saudi desert, the Haj has suffered frequent problems. Not trifling problems, such as a shortage of air-conditioned accommodation, but serious stuff such as bombs, riots, epidemics, and large-scale death. Back in 1990 a stampede in a tunnel killed 1,426 people. Three years earlier some 400 Shi'ites were killed in skirmishes with Saudi security forces. In 1979, a battle raged for two weeks between Islamic radicals, who took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and Saudi troops. At the end of it 127 Saudi soldiers lay dead, with more than 450 injured, and several hundred militants were killed; 63 of the surviving rebels were beheaded in the biggest mass execution in Saudi history. Last year was a quiet year, with a mere 14 deaths during the Eid al-Adha "stoning of the devil" ritual. Taking into account these disasters alone - and there have been numerous others - it's not easy to see how the Haj can be described as "superbly organised".

One explanation might be that Simpson, not usually a man to soften his words, had been refused a visa to Saudi Arabia for more than a decade and perhaps on finally being allowed back he did not want unnecessarily to upset the authorities. Or, perhaps more likely, he genuinely believed what he reported to be the case. Anyway, the very next day, at the climax of the Haj, 244 pilgrims were trampled to death during the stoning of the devil ceremony. To those of us used to the cry of judicial inquiry whenever an accident leads to even a handful of fatalities, 244 dead could be seen as something of an organisational failure. But apparently not. When questioned about the safety measures that were in place, Iyad bin Amin Madani, the Saudi minister for the Haj, replied: "I assure you that all preparations are always made, but we don't always know God's intentions."

Ah, yes, God, He moves in mysterious ways. Surely one of the greatest mysteries is why He should see fit to move with such lethal regularity on visitors to the Haj. It seems particularly ill-fitting that the vast crowd were shouting "God is greatest" at the very moment that He revealed His tragic intentions. I'm no theologian, so I can't pretend to understand the apparent contradiction of a religious festival celebrating God in which the celebrants, as part of God's grand scheme, are trampled to death. What I do know is that last year I wrote a column that attacked all religions for their abuse of the concept of God's will. In this regard I mentioned a certain "fundamentalist strain of Islam" and was consequently made the target of an organised correspondence campaign that, with a swift jerk of the knee, accused me of being a "racist". It would be reassuring to think that at this moment my correspondents were busy firing off outraged emails to Mr Madani and the Saudi government for daring to pin these appalling and avoidable deaths on God. Yet I fear Madani's excuse will be greeted by the pious with a complacency bordering on indifference, the same complacency that has allowed all the previous catastrophes at the Haj to pass with minimal comment.

The main reason for this, I suspect, is that the West is in no way responsible for these deaths - which in the past 25 years of the Haj run into the thousands. Thus, unlike, say, the victims of the war in Iraq, they are without political significance and therefore moral weight. At the

same time, no one else is interested in bringing attention to this recurring carnage because western governments - some of whose citizens are part of the pilgrimage - are afraid of offending the Saudis. And most westerners probably dismiss the whole thing as the strange workings of religious fanaticism. But of course the loss of each of these lives was a needless tragedy. All Muslims who are able to travel are obliged to perform the Haj once before they die. They are not obliged to perform it once and then die.

The Saudis have announced that they will set up a committee to look at reorganising the Haj. But to have any real effect they need first to reorganise themselves. After the battle of 1979, the Saudis responded to the extremist threat by handing responsibility for religious and moral affairs to the extremists. The mania that decision unleashed led two years ago to the witchfinders of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (the Saudi religious police) preventing a fire from being put out at a girls school in Mecca because the girls were inappropriately dressed. Fifteen girls died and 50 others were injured. God's intentions are not an explanation for incidents such as this and the stampede on Sunday. They are an excuse. Similarly, to hold the Saudis to account for these deaths is not an act of racism. But it is a form of racism to ignore them.

Find words in the text meaning:

- 1) to kill by cutting the head off *behead*
- 2) a minor battle *skirmish*
- 3) sincerely, really *genuinely*
- 4) the most exciting or important moment of an action *climax*
- 5) a "religious tourist" *pilgrim*
- 6) the amount one can hold in his hand *handful*
- 7) deadly *lethal*
- 8) so bad and unpleasant that it shocks *appalling*
- 9) a complete lack of interest *complacency*
- 10) the violent killing of large numbers of people *carnage*

True or false?

- 1) The author believes that the Haj is a "superbly organised" event. F
- 2) In 1990, 1,426 people were killed in a tunnel by fire. F
- 3) Last year only 14 people died during the Haj. T
- 4) The author was called a racist by his critics. T
- 5) His critics then wrote outraged emails to Mr Madani and the Saudi government. F
- 6) The West is not responsible for the fatal accidents at the Haj. T
- 7) Muslims are obliged to perform the Haj once and die in Saudi Arabia. F
- 8) Two years ago, fifteen girls died in a fire because they were inappropriately dressed. T
- 9) God is to blame for the deaths at the Haj. F
- 10) The Saudi religious police burned down a girls' school in Mecca. F