

After vandalism on mosque, scholars call for respect for sacred sites

ROME - The day after an ancient mosque in Jerusalem was vandalized and burned, allegedly by Jewish extremists, participants at a Rome conference on “sacred space” called for absolute respect for all places of worship.

Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars met Dec. 14-15 at Rome’s Pontifical University of St. Thomas to discuss the theological, legal and sociological implications of sacred space.

“In the course of our deliberations, we were given a reminder of how necessary and timely our exchanges indeed are, as we received news of yet another incident of mosque burning - even if a deserted mosque no longer in use - this time in Jerusalem itself, a city holy to all three religions,” said a statement issued at the end of the meeting.

News reports said the 12th-century Nebi Akasha Mosque has not been used for worship since Israel declared its statehood in 1948. The reports said the attack is believed to be part of a series of acts of vandalism by Jewish extremists protesting the scheduled demolition of Israeli settlements in the contested West Bank.

The scholars meeting in Rome said, “We assert a firm commitment to protect all spaces holy to all religions.”

The Rome meeting was sponsored by the interdisciplinary program in law and religion at The Catholic University of America’s Columbus School of Law in

Washington, the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University in Utah and the John Paul II Center at Rome's Pontifical University of St. Thomas, known as the Angelicum.

The scholars said protecting sacred space "is principled as well as practical. In principle, any house in which God is called in truth and sincerity is sanctified by the approach to God and must be respected by all. In practical terms, any act of destruction can return in short time to the perpetrator, generating an endless cycle of retaliation that is contrary to God's glory."

Sacred sites and houses of worship should not be harmed, even in times of conflict, the scholars said.

Respect for the sacred space of others "is not only a sign of respect to the one God we all recognize, but also a concrete way of learning to practice respect for one another," they said.

"Keeping holy sites out of conflict is a small step to humanizing a difficult situation and to remembering that God is our highest value and aspiration," they said.

Copyright © 2011 Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.