

Abraham as the Federating Spiritual Force of the Three Monotheistic Faiths, Past and Present

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ABSTRACT: Abraham, a central figure in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is the archetype of faith. Alas, in this troubled world, the will to power and domination seem to carry the day. And yet, there is more to unite the human community than to divide it. The paper draws a portrait of Abraham, expounds the lofty values he taught, and shows the ways in which such values could be used as a basis to foster interfaith dialogue and promote diversity, peaceful co-existence, and justice notwithstanding the many cultural differences that may be perceived as setting the followers of the three faiths apart.

KEYWORDS: Abraham, monotheistic faiths, interfaith dialogue, federating force.

I. Introduction

As the spiritual father of the three great monotheistic faiths, Abraham occupies a centre-stage in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the Old Testament, he is the bearer of a new Covenant between God and the Jewish people; he is also the venerated father-figure in the New Testament. And together, with Noah, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, he is one of the five Major Prophets in Islam. Respected and venerated by all, the first Patriarch is invoked by the faithful in the three revealed religions as the archetype of faith. He has been always viewed as a loving and federating figure and his life and sacrifices go together with moral lessons worthy of contemplation and emulation. Alas, in this troubled world, and especially in the Middle East — the birth place of the three monotheistic faiths — misguided politics and the will to power and domination seem to carry the day. However, a great many fair-minded and lucid people believe, and rightly so, that the children of Abraham, and the human community, at large, have much more to share.

The good values that Abraham has taught make of him a unifying and conciliating figure who believed in the perfection of God and also in the perfectibility of man. The question is as follows: are the followers of the three monotheistic faiths ready to leave their “comfort zone,” shake their dogmas, and venture into the unknown—which is the Other—in a bid to understand him and thereby pave the way for a better world where all the children of Abraham can co-exist, tolerate, and respect one another? The paper argues that it is possible to envision and achieve this goal provided the figure of Abraham is pondered again with a rational eye and a loving heart.

The paper will attempt to glean facts from the three Holy Books to draw a portrait of Abraham and the values he cherished and taught. Thereafter, the paper will show the ways in which such values could be used as a basis to foster interfaith dialogue—one that banishes claims to supremacy or ultimate truth—and proclaims diversity, peaceful co-existence, and justice in spite of the many cultural differences that may be perceived as setting the three monotheistic faiths apart. By way of conclusion, the paper will enumerate some of the most formidable challenges impeding interfaith dialogue and a few suggestions on how they might be raised.

II. The Figure of Abraham in the Jewish Tradition

According to the Jewish tradition, Abraham¹ was born in the year 1948 after the Creation (which corresponds to the year 1812 before the Christian era). His father *Terah*, is a descendant of Sem (hence, the qualifier “Semite”), the eldest son of Noah. He is a native of *Ur*, a small Chaldean town in Southern Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq), but he migrated to Haran in the north of the country. Though the dwellers of this Babylonian city were idolaters, the Bible and the Quran note, Abraham knew how to stay clear from polytheism which was even prevalent within the family household, where he lived with his younger siblings, Haran and Nahor. It seems that Abraham had had the chance to meet his forefather Sem, who venerated *Jehova* (the true God, in Hebrew), after he and his close relatives had been saved from the Flood.

The *Aggadab*, the non-legal part of the Classical Rabbinical texts, considers Abraham as the genuine father of monotheism. As such, he was the first person to have acknowledged the existence of a Single God, by way of reason solely. Once he became convinced about the truth of the faith, Abraham undertook to destroy all the idols fashioned by his pagan father. In order to crush the open revolt against the established order, the tyrannical Mesopotamian sovereign, Nimrod, ordained that Abraham be hurled into a furnace, from which Abraham emerged unscathed.

It was at the age of 75 that Abraham had his own calling from the Divine thus: “The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people, and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you.’” (Genesis, XII: 1-3) The Patriarch, as the archetypal Faithful, took Sarah, his wife, and Lot, his nephew, along his belongings and the servants he had acquired in Haran, and headed for *Canaan*. When they arrived there, the Lord appeared to Abraham and told him: “To you and your offspring I will give this land.” (Genesis, XII: 7). To reassure him further, God defined the limits of the lands subjected for his descendants: “To your descendants I give this land, from the *Wadi* of Egypt to the Great River of the Eupherate.” (Genesis, XII: 18-21). And these borders of the Sacred Land were to remain symbolic for hundreds of years.

Sarah, having been unable to bear him a child, a progeny was promised Abraham by God, to be started by Hagar, an Egyptian servant. Despite the predictable problems arising from the conflicts between the two women, Abraham finally had a son, Ismael (meaning, God Hears everything) who is considered to be the ancestor of Arab tribes. After this birth, God appeared again to Abraham to seal a second covenant, by virtue of which Abraham is to become the father of a multitude of nations. This alliance will be marked in the flesh of Abraham and that of his progeny by way of circumcision. Though satisfied with Ismael, God gave Abraham more: “As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless you so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of people will come from her.” (Genesis XVII: 15-16). Sarah, by some miracle, becomes fertile. At the age of 90 she gave Abraham, who had turned 99, a son, whom they called Isaac (meaning, “he will laugh”),² a name inspired by God and suggestive of the joys to be felt by the elderly parents, at the promise of a new unexpected lineage.

1 A great deal of the information about Abraham has been gleaned from Sirat, R.S. 2022, ‘*Abraham*’, In *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, [Web Page] accessed 9th May 2022, <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/abraham/>.

2 Highly informative facts, together with superb representations and pictures are found in the superbly written text: cf. Fellous, S., *Abraham dans l’iconographie des trois religions monotheistes*. Paris: IFHT-CNRS, 2004.

The advanced age of the Patriarch posed the delicate question of descent and patrilineal transmission, the first-born being Ishmael. Sarah, not wishing to see Ismail inherit with his half-brother, enjoined her husband to act radically and ban the Egyptian servant and her son. At the behest of his wife, Abraham banished Hagar and Ismail from his tents, after having received assurance that his elder son would engender a great nation. Equally significant is the promise made by an angel of God to Hagar, while she was still pregnant with Ismail. In the desert with little water and victuals, Hagar and her son survived thanks to divine help. When Isaac turned 25, God put Abraham to the test, by ordering him to sacrifice Isaac: “Take your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of *Moriah*. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” (Genesis XXII: 1-2). According to T. Römer,³ this is the most emblematic in the history of Abraham. In Chapter XII of Genesis, God had asked Abraham to renounce his past, and now He is asking him to forgo his own future (or, at least part of it). The Patriarch, a paragon of faith, was going to comply when the hand of an angel interposed stopping the sacrifice and handing a ram, miraculously found in a nearby wood. It was thus that human sacrifice was displaced by animal sacrifice.

As for Sarah, she died at the age of 127 in Hebron where Abraham buried her. He then married Kettourah, who gave him two sons. Prior to his own son, Abraham married Isaac to Rebecca who gave him two sons, Esau and Jacob. The latter, also a prophet, married two sisters, Leah and Rachel, who gave him twelve children, as God had promised him. These children would be the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, including Juda tribe, from which the dynasty of Prophet-King David would be issued. Abraham died at the age of 175, after a happy and serene old age, to use the Biblical expression. He was likewise buried in the tombs of the Patriarchs in Hebron.

By way of commentary on this fabulous story of Abraham, Thomas Römer asserts that in some prophetic books of the Bible, written prior to the Babylonian Exile (before the 6th Century B.), notably those penned by people other than the Apostles, there are allusions to Abraham which are not elaborated on, as though the figure were already a well-known reference, barely in need of further information. He concluded that the origin of Abraham finds its roots most likely in the local traditions which centre in a great and highly revered person in Hebron. He added that while the priests may not have created Abraham, they might nonetheless have considerably changed his story after the Exile. They may have established a link between Abraham and Jacob, two totally independent traditions, in their origins. They may also have invented the Mesopotamian origin of Abraham. By making him leave Ur, upon Divine command, they legitimized the return of exiles. It was thus that a local tradition, doubtless relatively modest, had suddenly taken tremendous importance.

III. The Figure of Abraham in the *Bible*

About a quarter of *Genesis*, the first book in the Bible, is devoted to the narrative of his life. His name is cited more than 236 times in the Old Testament and no fewer than 75 times in the New Testament. This highlights the significance of Abraham, the third man to whom God revealed Himself to humanity, after Adam and Eve, in the founding texts of Christianity. As Amelie Neuve-Eglise⁴ points out, in the New Testament, Abraham is depicted mainly as a man of faith: “by faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” (Epistle to the Hebrews, 11: 8), or again, “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who

³ Römer, Th., *La Bible, Quelles histoires! Entretien avec Estelle Villeneuve*. Paris : Bayard, 2014.

⁴ Neuve-Eglise, A. “Abraham, l’ami de Dieu et père du monothéisme,” *La Revue de Téhéran*, (August, 2008).

had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son.” (Epistle to the Hebrews, 11: 17). The promises in question are Divine promises made to the Patriarchs, of which the Descendants of Abraham are the beneficiaries.

But in the alliance established by God and Abraham, which is interpreted by Judaism as a perpetual pact between the Patriarch and his physical progeny (Isaac, Jacob, and the people of Israel), Christianity perceives the premises of a future alliance between the Eternal God and Christ, the Messiah carrier of the promise of salvation and resurrection for humanity, at large (The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, 3: 16). In the Gospel of John, Jesus of Nazareth thus spoke about the elation felt by the Father of the Faithful at the announced birth of Jesus: “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” (John 8: 56). The writings of the disciples of Jesus — who was Israelite by birth and considered as a descendant of Abraham, on account of his supposed kinship with King David (the Gospel of Matthew and Luke) — also see in the life patterns and actions of Abraham many signs heralding the advent of Christianity. Accordingly, the bread and wine service, following the blessings of Abraham by the Great Priest Melchizedech (Book of Genesis 14: 18-20), King of Salem (future Jerusalem), is perceived as a harbinger of Eucharist, by Primitive Christianity. For the Catholics and the Orthodox, this sacrificial act is an embodiment of the new covenant between God and the Christ. Similarly, the immolation of Isaac is seen as some prediction of the crucifixion of Jesus, with Isaac as Jesus and Abraham as the Creator. Another parallel is the angel who appeared to Abraham as he was getting ready to slaughter his son, which is taken to symbolize the Trinity. And the same may be said about the three angels which appear to the Patriarch from among the Mambre oak trees in Hebron to announce the birth of Isaac. There is a difference; however: after putting the faith of Abraham to the test, there is Divine intervention to save Isaac from slaughter, while in Christianity, Jesus, the only son of God is sacrificed to redeem humanity. Other parallels with Jesus of Nazareth are established throughout the New Testament, such as the miracle of birth, with Isaac being born to a 90 year-old barren woman (Sarah) and Jesus to the Virgin Mary.

IV. Abraham as a Model figure in Straightness

Emerging at the beginning of the 16th Century, as a result of an internal break within Western Christendom, the Protestant faith grants utmost importance to the figure of Abraham, not without reason. The followers of Martin Luther (1483-1546), bearers of a version of Christianity, free from superfluous elements or idea of intermediation, place faith in God and in the Holy Scriptures above all else. The authority of the Bible, which is the word of God, the only one that is considered is granted a higher status than any form of ecclesiastic hierarchy. It is the main reference in theological matters, moral precepts, and institutional organization. In this respect, the life narratives of Biblical figures are a source of inspiration for the faithful in this branch of Christianity. Abraham, as the personification of a single faith in a single God, as well as resolute faith that is exempt of any compromise, is also highly respected for his straightness, generosity, and sense of justice. As Gerard Bezin of the Evangelical Protestant Church in Cannes, France, explains, “Abraham is *the* main figure of the Old Testament. He is the most accomplished model of a man of faith. He represents the paternal figure of humanity and it is the role that the authors of the New Testament grant him. His Paternal status is no longer based on genealogical criteria; rather, Abraham becomes the father of all those who emulate his deeds and identify with the progeny that God had promised him.”⁵

5 Gerard Bezin, of the Evangelical Protestant Church in Cannes, France, sermons on various themes, see churchthemes.com.

The God of the Protestants is the God of freedom and Abraham incarnates the very essence of freedom, inasmuch as he had had the courage to quit the comforts of the native city of *Ur* and destroy the idols of his father, Terah, freeing himself from his own past and his present in favour of some unknown land and future. He had thus preferred promises to the comforts of already acquired assets. In the eyes of the Protestants, also, Abraham is also the proof that belief in God—itsself the outcome of a spiritual journey beset by doubts and on-going questionings—was the result of an encounter with the Divine. Abraham is thus connected with the All-powerful for eternity, but this adherence to monotheism is also an act of deliverance and love. Abraham is likewise a paragon of humility, altruism, and determination. For instance, when he settled on the mount overlooking Canaan, which God had intended for his progeny, he had actually renounced the city and the fertile plains around it for the benefit of his nephew, Lot, whom he would later save from the Divine punishment which visits the sinful town, Sodom. Further, he interceded on behalf of the city-dwellers, imploring God to spare the just ones in the cursed city, even though they were not part of his physical progeny. He thus placed the interests of other people above his own and earns the Divine promise to be the father of “a multitude of nations.”

To this day, as the embodiment of abnegation and wisdom, Abraham, the father of the faithful continues to be venerated by the faithful followers of the three main branches of Christianity: Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Saint Abraham is celebrated twice every year: on October 11 in the Oriental Churches and October 9th in the Catholic Church. It is a holy event which reminds every one of the journey taken by the first Patriarch and establishes a parallel with the “transfiguration” which the faithful Christians observe on the second Sunday of Lent.

V. The Figure of Abraham in the *Quran*

The first reference to Abraham in the *Quran* is made in association with another prominent figure, *Mūssa* (Moses). These Prophets are presented in glowing terms as having received the first *Subuhf* (literally, leaflets, but here messages which they were entrusted to transmit to their respective people, “And this is in the Books of the earliest (Revelations), the Books of Abraham and Moses.” (*Sura 87: 18-19*). Thereafter, these two figures are referred to separately and distinctively: *Mūsa* is depicted as a figure who managed to prevail over the Pharaoh and comes to assume a prominent position in all *Makkan* narratives. During this selfsame era (the *Makkan* one), Abraham has a more specific role. He is cited in relation to the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorroah, in a way that is strikingly similar to the Biblical narrative. Abraham is told that his wife, now old and barren, was going to give him a son: “[...] And they gave him the glad tidings of a son endowed with knowledge. But his wife came forward (laughing) aloud. She smote her forehead and said: ‘a barren old woman!’ They said, ‘even so has your Lord spoken: and He is Full of Wisdom and Knowledge.” (*Sura 51 (Al-Dhariyat): 24-30*) and (*Sura 11 (Hud): 69-73*). But the most notable Abrahamic narrative pertaining to this *Makkan* period reports the conflict between Abraham and his idol-worshipping father.

This great Abrahamic narrative is repeated several times in other verses pertaining to the *Makkan* phase, the most detailed of which is *Sura 21 (Surat Al-Anbia’): 51-70*. The importance of the narrative which highlights the break proclaimed and enacted by Abraham against the idol worship professed by his father resides in the fact that it provides the *Quran* a decisive argument to shore up the break with idol worship in *Makkah*, as incarnated in the local divinities, *Al-Lat*, *Al-Uzzah*, and *Manaf*; themselves believed to be the daughters of *Al-Illah*. *Sura 53 (Surat An-Najm): 19-20* thus find a Biblical precedent to vindicate Muhammad’s break with his own *Makkan* tribe.

Another focal point has to do with the role played by Abraham in founding the *Kaabah*. This is an episode that has not been made quite explicit in the *Makkan* era. But it became quite clear in the *Medinan* phase of *Quranic* revelation. This is most likely related to the pole-

mics arising between Muhammad, on the one hand, and the *Medinan* Jews, on the other. From the point of view of the *Quran*, Medinan Jews refusal to recognize Muhammad as the figure entrusted with completing the messages conveyed by their own prophets is incomprehensible, to say the least. This is all the more striking that the Jews are referred to as *Banu Israel* (the Children of Israel) and even in laudatory terms, as the Chosen people (*Sura 19 (Surat Maryam):* verse 58). But how can we account for this sudden opposition by *Medinan* Jews to Muhammad? Most likely, during the *Makkan* phase, the Jews had not heard about the message propounded discreetly by the Prophet. Moreover, unlike *Yathrib* (later renamed *Madinah*), in *Makkah* the Jews constituted a small minority only.

However, when Muhammad moved to the *Madinah* and conveyed his message (which constituted both an improved and mended version of the previous messages), he was met with a storm of protest. But the figure of Abraham was going to increase in importance. Upon a divine order, Abraham is declared the founder of the *Kaabah* (*Sura (Al-Baqarah) 2: verse 127*). This, of course, enhances the standing of Abraham, and, of Muhammad, who is now seen as the Messenger charged with carrying the torch of prophecy, showing people the way to rightness, and assuming the trust previously shouldered by Abraham and other prophets and messengers. But the choice of *Makkah* as the new seat of Prophecy may also be seen as a reassertion of the standing of the Prophet in opposition to the Medinan Jews and a reduction in the standing of the sacred sites in Jerusalem.⁶ It is in this context, that *Sura (Al-Imran) 3: verse 67* is revealed. According to the verse, Abraham is attached to the only True God by means of an exclusive alliance (*Hanif*), which he now transmits to Muhammad. And the latter is increasingly shown as the one who keeps to the straight path, while his Christian and Jewish contemporaries, notably those who have questioned his message, are presented as having lost the way.

Having surveyed the figure of Abraham in the three books, briefly and cursorily, I can make some observations regarding some commonalities, which certainly provide some ground for a fruitful dialogue between the three faiths.

- Notwithstanding differences in representations, origins, and appropriations by the three faiths of the figure of Abraham, there is no doubt that he is the “Spiritual Father” of the three great monotheistic religions. Abraham occupies a central place in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is the carrier of the covenant between God and the Jewish people in the Hebraic Bible. He is the Ancestor of Christianity in the New Testament. And together with Noah, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, he is one of the five greatest prophets in Islam. Respected and venerated by each and all, the first Patriarch is invoked by the faithful in the three “revealed” religions as an archetype of faith—unified, absolute, and unwavering faith in one God.
- Faith in Abraham is not the outcome of a sudden and blinding illumination, but rather the fruit of close observation and reasoning. It is also the achievement of a long and arduous spiritual quest, beset by all kinds of doubts, self-questioning, tests, and tribulations. When exhaustion takes hold of the body and the spirit, and when all hope vanishes, the Divine reveals itself finally, giving substance to a promise of a blessed progeny and a new world. By accepting to give up a peaceful life, familiar bearings and references, and his own past, Abram (meaning, revered and powerful father) becomes Abraham (the father of a multitude of nations).
- Abraham is the point of convergence of laws: though they make use of different reasoning, the laws pertaining to the monotheistic faiths assert the supremacy of God and forbid associating other gods with Him; they order their followers to honor parents and elders; they prohibit unjust killing, adultery, lying, false testimony and other dubious deeds which unravel the social fabric and undermine the ethical values which give strength to society, uphold justice and repel iniquity. These moral laws,

6 See Chabbi, J., *Le Coran décrypté. Figures bibliques en Arabie* (Paris : Fayard, 2008).

if combined with ethical rules developed by human kind in different faith tradition, constitute a strong basis on which peaceful, tolerant, and good universal community may be built. Essential to all three faiths are these conceptions which should be emphasized and translated into action: acceptance of the other—even when they differ markedly from one, is difference not a sign of God’s mercy?—the divinity of social and communal differentiation; equality before God; and the dismissal of any superiority of one community over others.

- Abraham is above all the embodiment of ethical values which ought to form the foundation of interfaith dialogue: these values include sincerity, unwavering faith, faithfulness, moral rectitude, and readiness to open up other people. Like Odysseus who had accepted the status of mortals and rejected the offer of immortality, Abraham rejected the comforts of his homelands and ventured into unknown and even hostile lands so that he could meet, get to know, and establish ties of friendship with other people. And these values should be the moral force driving the common endeavours of faithful people in all three faiths. I have been impressed by Mark Halter’s book, *La Memoire d’Abraham*, a book which offers a narrative into the remote history of the Jews and calls for reconciliation and dialogue which would lead to peace, co-existence, and cooperation. Jean Paul II was so moved by the book he recommended the holding of interreligious meeting in *Assize*, which have truly helped promote dialogue and peace initiatives. Similarly, there have been similar calls for interfaith dialogues in many Muslim countries, including Morocco,⁷ Egypt, and UAE.

There have been countless good will initiatives aimed at instituting and promoting interfaith dialogue on the part of well-meaning individual, groups, entities, and governments in all three faiths, but these have had modest impacts due to the challenges attendant upon them. But the latter should on no account discourage the people driving interfaith dialogue. Here, let me outline what I think are the most daunting challenges and how they can be raised. I consider one challenge at a time and provide a suggestion on how to mitigate or overcome it.

VI. Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue

There are formidable challenges, to be sure, but they are worth raising for the sake of peace, co-existence, and justice. These can be summed up as follows:

1. There is a tendency in the representatives of the three faiths who are engaged in interfaith dialogue to promote the best in their respective traditions, while censuring the worst in others. This is clearly seen in their respective use of their own scriptures: the followers of the three faiths tend to be selective, showing their faiths to be more authoritative, more inclined to peace, more open to present-day democratic institutions, more flexible and so forth. As a way out, it may be useful and valuable for persons of each religious community to hear members of the other communities speak squarely about the doubts, problems, and shortcomings that their respective communities are experiencing. Communicating humility, criticising the self, and reaching out to others in good faith can contribute to healing, foster mutual understanding, and build mutual respect).
2. Given that religions developed in different periods, there is a tendency to magnify certain traditions and to negate or reduce the value of other religions. This is known as “super-secessionism.” More explicitly, some followers of the Jewish faith proclaim

⁷ I have in mind the Marrakech Declaration on Minority Rights as a means to bolster interfaith dialogue or Pope Francis II visit to Morocco, in the Spring of 2019, which was designed to give a boost to interfaith dialogue.

themselves to supersede other faiths and charge other faiths of being mere imitations or offshoots of Judaism. Likewise, the followers of certain branches in the Christian and the Islamic faiths claim theirs are perfected or newer versions of the older faiths. The fundamentalist trend within each of the three traditions is to be blamed for this tendency, Fundamentalists are inclined to see the world divided into good and evil forces, the “us” and the “others”. Obviously, blind adherence to religious dogmas and unquestioning submission to religious authority cultivate zealotry which, in turn, culminates in hatred and violence. To deal with this issue, moderate people in all three faiths readily identify the mercy, clemency, and roominess of their faiths. They know that God had willed diversity, out of mercy for humankind. They also know that God has ordained three Abrahamic paths to the Holy. The role model here, Abraham, willingly left his tent open to the four winds, so that each and all may accede to it. The metaphor is exemplary and should be adopted whole-hearted. Faith is at its best when it is free from all forms of compulsion, duress, or coercion.)

3. Within each of the three monotheistic faiths, there exist a plethora of sects, denominations, and groups, some of which are extreme and even radical in their views. In each of the three faiths there are ultra Orthodox people who believe that they are the only ones privy to the truth and reject the other. In Islam, for instance, *Takfeer* ideology impels its advocates to brand all those who differ with them even on minor points as *Kafirs* (infidels) and charge all non-Muslims with infidelity. Similarly, in Judaism, the ultra-Orthodox show little tolerance towards their co-religionists, let alone the followers of the other faiths. This is a tough challenge facing all faiths. And we all recall what William Butler Yeats said in relation to the “worst,” who are full of passionate intensity, and the “best who lack all conviction.” But here again, the moderates, who constitute the silent majority, could serve as a counter-veiling force against the discourse of the extremist, and through the model provided by the enlightened elites, the worst can be defeated or, at least contained. But this takes a counter-ideological fight designed to question and repel their fallacious claims and discourses of hatred and exclusion. And education plays a crucial role in this respect. Once the conditions of exclusion and poverty have been mitigated and education has been universalized, extremists can be reduced to insignificance and mutual co-existence will be hugely fostered. Equally, important is the need to engage in intra-faith dialogues to eliminate the rifts which threaten to rend the fabric of faith asunder. This is the case of the Islamic world where *Shia* and *Sunnis* are still divided and their differences are instrumentalized by demagogues and politicians. There is need to develop programs for interfaith reading of sacred texts to inform and deepen understanding of one another. Similarly, intra-faith conferences should be held to build trust and foster understanding.⁸
4. Few would dispute the negative impact that the media has had on interfaith relations, especially in time of crises and wars. Excessive emphasis on the negative side of religion and actions of religious extremists generates interfaith fear and even hostility and saps the good will of all those who are fully engaged in it. A modest proposal here is as follows: greater media attention needs to be given to the positive endeavours that have been taken within the Islamic world and outside it to reach out across religious boundaries. More serious work should also be directed towards the sources of stereotyping and fear-manufacturing. I have in mind Hollywood and the film industry; some conservative think-tanks all over the world which perpetuate the myths instead of questioning them. But stereotypes could be best debunked by means of better

8 See, Othmane Toujri, M., *Rapprochement between Madhabs (Rites): Premises and Methods*, Proceedings of an Intra-faith Conference held in Rabat in 1997.

cross-cultural education. Efforts should be invested in developing teaching materials about the three faith traditions for use at various levels in the educational structure. For example, an anthology could be developed on the three Abrahamic traditions to be used in high school and universities. In addition, courses need to be developed on Abrahamic peace-making, teaching how the three faith traditions understand and promote peace.

5. An equally daunting challenge has to do with the rather Manichean view of the world held by millions of common people and uneducated world-leaders who show little empathy and understanding of other people. Worse, they assign goodness and innocence to themselves and project evil onto others. Leaders of interfaith dialogue ought whenever possible to be critical of their own governments in the name of spirituality, citizenship, and universality. As Alan Geyer once observed: ‘peace-making, whether in personal, group, or international relations, requires a variety of capacities for self-transcendence: transcendence of one’s interests and perspectives for the sake of understanding the interests and perspectives of the other side, which calls for the virtue of empathy, transcendence of one’s pride and defensiveness, which inhibit the acknowledgement of injuries done to the others—a capacity for repentance and perhaps restitution; transcendence of one’s grievances and desire for vengeance over injuries inflicted by others, a capacity for forgiveness.’⁹

The challenges, aside, the proponents of Abrahamic dialogue for the sake of peaceful co-existence and shared prosperity have also thought about a number of initiatives designed to highlight the centrality of Abraham in that project and to underscore his role as a federating force in the present and in the future. One such which has drawn my keen interest is the Abraham Path Initiative—a cultural walking route that retraces the journey of Abraham, the legendary ancestor of over half of humanity. Story, walking, and hospitality are the cultural route’s central theme. The path focuses on the diverse communities living in the region that share a common heritage in Abraham as an ancestor that may identify his story as an important component of their cultural DNA. The path also demonstrates the power of walking, giving perspective to remember their origins and to be hospitable and kind towards perfect strangers. The main historical sites on the current path are *Urfu* (the birthplace of Abraham, according to Muslim tradition); *Haran*, according to the Hebrew Bible. This is a town Abraham lived in and from which he received the call to start the main part of his journey; *Jerusalem*, the scene for the binding of Isaac, according to the Hebrew Bible; and *Hebron*, the location of the tomb of Abraham and his wife Sarah, according to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions.

In a nutshell, the appeal of Abraham as a source of commonality and kinship among the three monotheistic faiths makes eminent sense and can help defeat the widespread notion that strong religious commitments can be a source only of division and discord. If the appeal to Abraham simply invokes his name in pursuit of inter-communal peace and harmony but disregards his teachings with which these three communities associate him, it can be shallow and self-defeating. Those who invoke Abraham out of a commendable desire for inter-communal peace must be careful not to allow their pluralism to slide into relativism, as if the figure they invoke made no truth claims. The challenge before Jews, Christians, and Muslims, alike, is to uphold with integrity both the connections and the divisions or differences. Since today, the pressure to uphold the connections is vastly greater than the pressure to uphold divisions. And this is, alas, no easy task.

At a moment when the world is asking, “can the religions get along?” One figure stands out as the shared ancestor of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. One man holds the key to our deepest fears and possible reconciliation, Abraham. Both immediate and timeless, Abraham

⁹ Stassen, G. ed. *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998.

is a powerful, universal story, the first ever interfaith portrait of the man God chose to be his “friend.” Thoughtful and inspiring, it offers a rare vision of hope that will redefine what we think about our neighbours, our future, and ourselves. No matter how daunting the challenges and the odds likely to undermine Abrahamic dialogue and the initiatives related to it, the people advocating it should never lose *hope*. Losing hope in their worthy endeavour would mean giving a chance to extremists in all three faiths to have their ways, to foster divisions, and to beat the drums of wars of religions.

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