

One Abraham or three? The conversation between three faiths

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*Abraham's Departure*, József Molnár, 1850.

In his June 2009 speech at Cairo University, Barack Obama invoked a scene from Muhammad's night journey in which Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are joined in prayer. Obama sketched out his vision of the Holy Land as a place of peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims against the backdrop of long years of bloodshed and religious strife. He appealed to the "children of Abraham" to open a new era of politics.

Like the Founding Fathers, Obama acknowledged the importance of religion for public morality and democracy. For the revolutionary generation, the health of democratic government depended on values derived from religion. The American experiment was doomed to fail without pious and responsible citizens. For the founders, democracy and faith complemented each other like two spouses in a well-functioning marriage.

Public religion—that is, a broadly shared system of beliefs, symbols, and values at the center of American democracy—was a key element in the construction of the

republic. In his Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington reminded the nation that “religion and morality are indispensable supports [for] political prosperity” and warned that the supposition that “morality can be maintained without religion” should be indulged “with caution.”

But Obama also trod on new ground when he invoked the “three great faiths” and appealed to Jews, Christians, and Muslims as Abrahamic kin. During the revolutionary period, the marriage of democracy and faith had been solidified under a very Protestant canopy. America became a nation with the “soul of a church,” as G. K. Chesterton so pointedly put it in 1922.

After the American Revolution, though, other biblical traditions joined the story. By the first decades of the 20th century, the original canopy was stretched to include Catholics and Jews. Around the time of World War II, a new cultural paradigm was invoked to describe the nation’s public religion: the idea of “Judeo-Christianity” had great resonance in postwar America.

These days, however, things are more complex. Judeo-Christianity no longer adequately describes the American religious family. So can it be that we are at the dawn of the Abrahamic paradigm, encompassing Muslims as well?

Before considering that possibility, it is worth remembering the history and accomplishments of the idea of Judeo-Christianity. The concept is linked to the efforts of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. In the 1930s, in the face of fascism, Nazism, and anti-Semitism, the NCCJ held out a vision of America which relied on a distinct heritage of biblical traditions and public morals shared by Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. What held American democracy together, the NCCJ claimed (and in time this became popular opinion), was a set of “Judeo-Christian” ideas and values. The concept provided an “antifascist affirmation of a shared religious basis for western values,” according to historian Mark Silk. Over time, it morphed into shorthand for “a worldview, and a set of beliefs, that Jews and Christians held in common,” noted historian William Hutchison.

The notion that Protestants, Catholics, and Jews are “equally legitimate, equally American expressions of an over-all American religion,” and that they represent “essentially the same ‘moral ideals’ and ‘spiritual values’” received its most popular expression in Will Herberg’s 1955 best seller *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. Herberg was able to balance cultural pluralism on a widely shared moral ground.

During the cold war, this deep-seated linkage between American democracy and Judeo-Christianity provided an ideological basis for America's battle against totalitarianism abroad. President Dwight Eisenhower famously summarized the American creed a month before his inauguration when he said that American democracy "has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith." And this faith, Eisenhower specified, was nothing else but "the Judeo-Christian concept."

Over the past 60 or so years, however, the geopolitical and religious landscapes have changed dramatically, making Judeo-Christianity seem like a quaint artifact of a bygone age. Nazism and Soviet communism have been thoroughly defeated. The world is no longer as threatened by political ideology, but rather by frequent outbursts of religious violence and extremism.

True, some American conservatives have repurposed the term Judeo-Christian, as has been evident in some recent rhetoric against Islamic extremism. But as a broadly shared concept of inclusion, Judeo-Christian is no longer common currency. The United States has, as Diana Eck puts it, become "the world's most religiously diverse nation" such that our civic principles and values cannot be symbolized in a language that refers only to Jews and Christians. The once popular concept of inclusion has morphed into an exclusivist term that is conserved by those who are unwilling to accept the religious pluralism of 21st-century America.

But can "Abrahamic" replace "Judeo-Christian"? Can a paradigm—one that intertwines the three great prophetic traditions in their faith in one God, divine creation, human dignity, and eschatological justice—express the civic faith of the American people? Can it do so without sacrificing the integrity of these interwoven yet different traditions?

The growing use of the term *Abrahamic* suggests that many think it can. In contemporary academic as well as nonacademic discourse, the biblical patriarch Abraham is frequently invoked as a crucial figure binding the sacred narratives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Despite the different stories these siblings in faith tell about him, Abraham is essential in the theological concepts, rituals, and liturgies of his children.

Abraham has become a counter-metaphor amidst interreligious quarrels. Inspired by the 2002 best seller *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, by Bruce Feiler, *Time* magazine put an image of Abraham on its cover with the subtitle:

“Abraham: Muslims, Christians and Jews all claim him as their father. A new book explores the challenge of turning him into their peacemaker.”

Building relationships between adherents of the three major monotheistic religions is not a completely new idea. The French mystic and scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon (1883–1962), for example, was an early supporter of encounter and conversation between the Abrahamic faithful. To him, the three Abrahamic religions are like branches of the same monotheistic revelation. His meditation on the “Three Prayers of Abraham” (1949)—what some consider the basis of modern of Abrahamic dialogue—scrutinized Abraham’s intercessory prayers for the people of Sodom, Ishmael, and Isaac in Genesis, foreshadowing the rise of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Likewise, the Brotherhood of Abraham (Fraternité d’Abraham), founded in Paris in 1967 in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), has been building relationships by working toward understanding and reconciliation among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. On the American side, Francis E. Peters in 1982 published *The Children of Abraham*, an account of the intertwined histories and teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in order to create dialogue among those who pray to the God of Abraham but do so in separate spaces. As Peters continually reminds his readers, all of Abraham’s children draw their historical origin back to the moment when the one God appeared to Abraham and bound him in covenant.

The agenda of Abraham as peacemaker, as grand symbol for interreligious dialogue and counter-metaphor amidst interreligious strife, is also reflected by the numerous initiatives that have blossomed and flourished in recent years. *The Faith Club* (2006), for instance, is a book by three New York women—a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew—who reached out to each other in the months after the attacks of September 11. The three traveled the country for several years in order to inspire others to seek religious and civic understanding. They have male counterparts in a pastor, a rabbi, and an imam from Seattle who attempt to develop an inclusive Abrahamic spirituality in their book *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith* (2009).

Then there are academic initiatives like the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at the University of Wisconsin and the Children of Abraham Institute at the University of Virginia, which are organizing research and public conversation between scholars and followers of the Abrahamic religions. In recent years, in the context of these and other initiatives, Jews, Christians, and Muslims

have begun to imagine their Abrahamic narratives as a common source of civility and peacemaking.

At the Lubar Institute, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim undergraduates have started to overcome religious intolerance through candid conversations about cartoon controversies, gender issues, and prayer practices. Shared trips to mosques, churches, and synagogues have enabled them to form relationships of trust and respect by learning about each other's sacred spaces, texts, and rituals. Through debate and dialogue the students have been startled and comforted by the fact that they share sacred sources, stories of prophets, and a social obligation to care for the poor (Tzedakah, Zakat, social gospel). With each new revelation of their commonality, their bounds of moral imagination have expanded, and their "they" has given way to a "we." All this gives good reason to believe that the Abrahamic paradigm is not just a noble idea but a promising new foundation for civic discourse and interfaith understanding.

Nevertheless, the Abrahamic paradigm has its critics. Perhaps the strongest is Harvard University's Jon D. Levenson. In *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2012), Levenson argues that the civic meaning of Abraham as grand metaphor for peacebuilding is undermined by the sacred texts and traditions of his children. According to Levenson, there is no "neutral *Ur-Abraham*" independent of the different Abrahamic religions "yet authoritative over them." The use of Abraham as an inclusive figure in civic discourse is contradicted by the exclusive ways in which the Abrahamic traditions claim Abraham as a model for their own identity and particularity.

True, the three faiths have three different Abrahams. For Jews, the biblical patriarch Abraham is chosen by God. Through him the people of Israel are also chosen as his descendants. God made a covenant with Abraham, who dutifully passed all tests of faith, showing his willingness to sacrifice his own son if required by God. In rabbinical literature, Abraham is represented as the exemplary Jew who faithfully follows the commandments of the Torah.

For Christians, the biblical patriarch is a central link between the Old and the New Testament. He serves as illustration of St. Paul's notion of justification by faith, and as an exemplar of faith he is somewhat of a Christian ideal type. No longer is he the one who observes the Torah; instead he's the one who is justified because of his

faith in God. Thus Abraham is the “father of all Christians,” and anyone who believes in Christ is a true descendant of Abraham.

For Muslims, Abraham belongs to the 21 biblical prophets mentioned in the Qur’an. He is an iconoclast who repeatedly passes God’s muster, and even shows willingness to sacrifice his son. Abraham is the archetype of complete submission to God. He also initiates the cult at Mecca. The Abraham narrative offers the blueprint for the annual hajj. Muhammad came to renew the original religion of Abraham that had been corrupted by Jews and Christians. The first prophet and the seal of the prophets are inherently related.

Undoubtedly, these different Abrahamic narratives are in competition with one another. How can these very particular and exclusivist Abrahams be invoked in order to harmonize the differences between the traditions?

The answer may be in taking what some see as a problem for Abrahamic civic discourse and recognizing that it is its greatest asset. Perhaps it even provides a fresh opportunity to reflect more profoundly on interreligious dialogue and otherness.

Historically, the theologies of the Abrahamic traditions have been based on confrontational models. Orthodox Jews consider themselves to be special, chosen people because of God’s original covenant with Abraham. The church maintained that it superseded the Jewish people and salvation cannot be gained outside the church. Muslims see in Muhammad the ultimate prophet, and historically Jews and Christians are believed to be *dhimmi*—people of other faith who are forced to accept Muslim rule.

If, however, the mutually shared forefather and religious exemplar comes down to the faithful only in the form of different images and stories, and if Abraham exists only in the plural as Abrahams, then the Abrahamic paradigm urges us to recognize difference and multiple voices at the very heart of faith. If the Abrahamic endeavor doesn’t start with an overarching unity and sameness located in some neutral *Ur*-Abraham, but with a call for distinctiveness, a call to recognize the other as other, then Jews, Christians, and Muslims seriously need to rethink their confrontational theological models.

The diverse America of the 21st century provides the ground on which the children of Abraham can examine together untapped resources in their texts and traditions

which would allow for them to envision their synagogue, church, and *ummah* as well as their interrelations in fresh and bold ways. Respectful and honest Abrahamic discourse will lead to new awareness that we can and should be part of the same moral community despite our different religious identities. It can create mutual esteem for the different ways in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in the same merciful and all-powerful God whom they all adore as creator and final judge. It can give Abraham's descendants a better grasp of their distinct yet overlapping faith practices centered on human dignity, social justice, and spiritual discipline.

Against the background of Abrahamic discourse, the faithful would return to the civic arena with a theology of difference that offers a much improved sense of their own particularity as well as a theologically enriched language to engage and interact with each other. Equipped with a theology of otherness and difference created under the Abrahamic paradigm, Americans would have a way to negotiate between the Protestant canopy of the founding, the unifying appeal of Judeo-Christianity, and the growing religious pluralism of the 21st century.

Even though we cannot draw on a neutral *Ur*-Abraham as grand metaphor for peace, the paradigm does offer a new point of reference for the *Ur*-American marriage between faith and democracy. The discourse of the children of Abraham can spearhead efforts to define mutual ideas and values we share as Americans while we better appreciate our commonalities *and* differences.

*Abrahamic* is not just a fancy new term in U.S. foreign policy. It dares us to dream of an America that is a dwelling place not only for churches and synagogues, but also for mosques. Interreligious, Abrahamic discourse might even lead to a new grand passage between religious pluralism and public morality, so that America can again set a global example for religious tolerance and inclusivity.