

Faces of Abraham
Conceptual Versions of Monotheism and
Interpretative Visions of its Foundational Figure

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Interreligious dialogue engaging Judaism, Christianity and Islam willingly positions at its focal point the common foundational figure Abraham, understood as the seeker of God who attained a fundamental understanding of God in His transcendent Oneness and His relationship to the World as creation. More than this, he is also seen by the three monotheistic religions as authentically and thus in an exemplary manner worshipping God and as actively spreading and promoting this monotheistic perspective and practice.

The divergent monotheisms can therefore recognize in Abraham an existential model allowing them to see their common root and to in consequence to unite in their theological and ethical endeavour. By referring to Abraham the three monotheisms might aspire to find common ground not only for inter-communal reconciliation after centuries of enduring and much too often violent conflicts but even for a trans-communal practice confronting the challenges of an often adversive modern society. More than this, the reference to Abraham seems to make possible to ask, from a critical metaperspective, fundamental theological and theoretical questions about the nature of monotheism as such, that is questions concerning its original idea or even its possible essential core. By accepting the guidance of Abraham, the three monotheisms seem to be ready to really become the channel through which the promised blessing we learn about in the biblical story of Abraham may reach the families of the earth.

If the reference to Abraham and its mission to promote the idea of the One God unites Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the reference functions in different forms. Whereas Judaism and Christianity refer initially to the same textual basis in the Book of Genesis, the Islamic Abraham is to be found in the Kuran. Interestingly, whilst the same textual basis serves in Judaism and in Christianity as starting point for decisively different interpretations of Abraham, the different kuranic Abraham – or *Ibrahim* – seems to show theological character traits closer to the Jewish *Avraham* than the Christian *Abraham*. The Islamic understanding for Ibrahim can thus easily be reconnected to the Midrashim as part of Judaism's Oral Tora whereas Christianity's Abraham is born out of a specific interpretation of the Book of Genesis or the Jewish Written Tora.

Contrary to the understanding of Abraham as the the uniting basis of the different monotheisms, as the point where their perspectives retrospectively converge, Abraham can also be understood as the starting point of their diverging conceptualizations since the theological differences are reflected in sometimes radically contrasting interpretations of the foundational figure. The common recognition of Abraham as foundational figure is therefore not only the ground for theological unity and practical reconciliation but also, in the plurality of its interpretations, the point of monotheistic

divergence and even of theological separation.

The various perceptions, interpretations and projections of Abraham concern fundamental conceptions of what the reference to and the worship of the One God could mean: Did Abraham's genuine merit lay in that he discovered God through critical reflection, in that he believed in Him, in that he trusted Him or in that he obeyed Him? Was Abraham the founding father of the Jewish people in its particularity or a universalistic prophet bringing the idea of the One God with its inherent blessing to all mankind? These questions indicate that Abraham could turn in the various monotheistic perspectives into a highly divisive figure: Whereas for the Jews he is a model of Tora observance and the foundational figure of God's irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people, for the Christians he exemplifies that faith, and not Torah law, generates salvation. If Islam seems to valorize, as Judaism, law observance and righteousness, and puts, as Christianity a strong emphasis on faith, the Islamic concept of faith has as little in common with its Paulinian understanding, as the understanding of obedience to law in Islam seems compatible with the Jewish idea of the righteous Abraham who did not only obey God, but at the same time dared to put seriously into question God's verdict on Sodom and Gomorrah. And whilst Muslims converge with Christians in detaching Abraham from its particularistic interpretation in Judaism, Islam tries to free Abraham not only from its Jewish but also from its Christian distortion and to recognize him as a proponent of a pure and thus universal monotheism in the sense Mohammed would finally establish it.

It could be said then that, if there are three Abrahamic religions, this is possible only since there are actually three Abrahams or three versions of this foundational figure. The well intended concept of the „Abrahamic faiths“ could thus be as theoretically misleading as it might be politically needed. This warning could lead to the idea that the figure of Abraham is not useful as the central figure of interreligious discourse which should instead, as has been pointed out by Kenneth Cragg, have the One God as its focal point, and understand the interpreted „Abraham“ as the starting point of divergence.

On the other hand, this critical perspective might open a different perspective on the hoped-for interreligious discourse, a perspective that does not aim at a practical reconciliation through the projection of a levelling theological unity but brings the different religions together in a conjoint philosophical reflexion concerning the possible sense or senses of the monotheistic vision. Recognizing the divergence of the monotheistic perspectives through their converging *and* diverging understandings of Abraham can prove fruitful if we are aiming at an interreligious dialogue than not only aims at a better understanding between (*dia*) the religions but also at a better reflection of what each of them specifically stands for, that is if we try to promote a discourse that is focussing on *logos*-dimension in our dia-logue or tria-logue.

Righteousness, obedience or faith - what is more fundamental for a true and fruitful reference to God? What understanding of Law and of obedience to this Law do we find in Judaism, Christianity and Islam? What does Faith mean in Judaism, Christianity and Islam? How can we conceive of the relationship between Law and Faith and existential significance for the observer or believer do the different conceptions have? What role does reason play for a monotheistic position? How is reason conceived of in the three versions of monotheism and how is its relationship to faith and law understood? What does the Oneness of God mean? How can the interaction between Man and God be conceived of? What kind of practice is expected from the observer or the believer – in front of God, in relationship with him- or herself, and finally with the other or the different others? If these questions are, obviously, fundamental questions concerning the idea of monotheism as such, all these questions lead to and are reflected in different understandings of Abraham as the foundational figure of the three different and in some respects, strongly diverging, versions of monotheism.

The Conference „Faces of Abraham: Conceptual Versions of Monotheism and Interpretative Visions

of its Foundational Figure“ intends to open a tria-logical discourse on the different conceptions of monotheism through a reflection on the different visions of Abraham. Abraham, in the plurality of the hermeneutic perspectives, can serve as a prism to clarify and discuss conjointly the converging and diverging perspective of the three monotheistic religions. Entering together the hermeneutical circle between theological ideas and interpretative perspectives on Abraham it is possible to enter a real theological discussion highlighting possible differences or even oppositions in our common root. Abraham, the symbol of hospitality can thus be the embracing host to recognize our difference without the need to sacrifice it to a superficial reconciliation, helping us to establish what could be called following Heraclitus a *loving dispute* or, with reference to Lyotard, a kind of sympathetic *differend!*