How Abrahamic is 'Abrahamic Dialogue'?[1]

George Bristow

Introduction

Burgeoning efforts in so-called 'Abrahamic dialogue' reflect increasing interest in investigating and utilising the common appeal to Abraham by Jews, Christians, and Muslims in today's pluralistic world. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their roots to Abraham. Parks documents how Abraham has been seen as 'the first Jew' by Jewish writers, as 'the first Christian' by Christians and as 'the first Muslim' by Muslims.[2] Each tradition has at times claimed unique or even exclusive rights to the patriarch. The Qur'an takes note of these competing claims, addressing itself to Jews and Christians:

> People of the Book, why do you argue about Abraham when the Torah and the Gospels were not revealed until after his time? Do you not understand? God knows and you do not. Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian (Q 3:65-67).

Ancient Abrahamic traditions have thus been utilised to foster both positive relationships and deep interfaith conflict. Kuschel describes this as a 'family dispute' in which 'each of the three faiths believes that it has preserved the paternal or maternal heritage in the purest form'.[3] Yet, in spite of this ongoing dispute, many today believe that Abrahamic identity opens up common ground that should be cultivated for the common good. For example, Moyaert holds that 'Interreligious dialogue is the place where we can listen to the stories of religious others and enter their world.'[4] Jewish writer Kogan draws attention to the way distinct identities have developed from the Genesis Abraham narrative: 'That these [biblical] stories, *differently interpreted* (as they are in Christianity), or *differently told* (as they

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[1] This essay is adapted from chapter 1 of George Bristow, *Sharing Abraham?: Narrative Worldview, Biblical and Qur'anic Interpretation and Comparative Theology in Turkey* (Cambridge, Mass: Doorlight Academic, 2017).

[2] D. R. Parks, 'Abraham, the 'First Christian' and the 'First Muslim': Hermeneutics of a Religious Symbol in Western Christianity and Sunni Islam' (PhD Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987). See also Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter, *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), p. 37.

[3] Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1995), p. 3.

[4] Marianne Moyaert, 'Interreligious dialogue and the debate between universalism and particularism: searching for a way out of the deadlock', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no. 1 (2005), p. 15.

are in Islam), have become part of the core narrative of two related faiths attests to their profundity and their power.'[5]

Abrahamic dialogue must be clearly distinguished from the larger field of which it is a subset. This distinction is not always adequately addressed in theologies of religion which appeal to the natural revelation common to all peoples or common paternity as God's creatures.[6] The claim to possession of Abrahamic roots puts the issue on a different footing. Because of competing claims of special revelation, this dialogue is inextricably linked with what has been called *scriptures in dialogue* and the complex issues of *scriptural intertextuality*. Responsible study of our respective Scriptures is an imperative for this type of dialogue.

Abraham and Ecumenical Unity

Abraham is frequently recruited as a key ally in efforts to bring about peace and mutual understanding among conflicted groups and nations. Josua notes (though with evident concern) that many voices proclaim that 'the three monotheistic religions should leave behind their competition up to now, reflect instead about their mutual father figure Abraham, and bear witness of intellectual and moral values to an increasingly areligious and unjust world'.[7] Efforts of this sort are seen especially in places where pluralism and globalism have brought communities of different faith traditions into close contact. Catholic scholar Valkenberg recounts the benefits of his interfaith encounters with Turkish Muslims in the Netherlands:

> [This dialogue can] contribute to a form of God-talk in which Muslims and Christians may share their traditions as mutual incitements to a broader understanding of God... European Christians have a lot to learn from the strangers who are our interlocutors in these dialogues.[8]

In a western academic context, the 'Oxford Abrahamic Group' brings together Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars with a goal of deepening mutual understanding of respective Abrahamic scriptures and traditions. Winter introduces a work by members of this group with optimism about the future of interfaith cordiality: 'Today, despite the headlines, and the heated rhetoric of fundamentalist preachers on all sides, it is reasonable to claim that

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[5] Michael S. Kogan, 'Abrahamic Faith: Calling and Response in Jewish Narrative Theology', in *Abrahamic Faiths, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts,* ed. by Paul Peachey, George F. McLean, and John Kromkowski (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1997), pp. 99-114 (p. 96).

[6] Models for a Christian theology of religions are examined by Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

[7] Hanna N. Josua, 'Ibrahim, Khalil Allah: Eine Anfrage an Die Abrahamische Ökumene' (PhD Dissertation, Evangelisch-Theologischen Facultat, 2005), p. 585.

[8] Pim Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. xiv-xv.

most Abrahamic believers find themselves on slowly convergent paths.'[9] The scholars involved do acknowledge that there are no shortcuts in this process. Such initiatives are 'most likely to succeed where the theology insists on the integrity of each religion, and refuses the logic of syncretism or relativism. Abraham's God, after all, is a God of truth, whose demands are absolute.'[10] As I will argue, such integrity demands careful comparative theological reflection on the respective Abraham narratives.

Faith-based initiatives for peace are attractive because of what Breiner describes as the perceived 'efficacy of religious faith to deal with contemporary problems'.[11] Some initiatives show that Abrahamic commonality can be a basis for bringing people together on a local level. For example, one report examines texts in each tradition that seem to support violence, and then focuses on other perspectives within these traditions which can promote 'Abrahamic alternatives to war' such as teachings and ethical imperatives within their sacred texts.[12] Sheridan finds such an opportunity in Genesis 25.9 where Isaac and Ishmael bury their father together. She argues that the text 'may well found the basis for a new look at the role of Ishmael'.[13]

However, many of these efforts to ground peace-making in the Abraham narrative are unconvincing. For example, Sensenig contrasts Abraham's 'peace-making paradigm' with Israel's subsequent history: 'The violent seeds of conquest sown by Joshua's 'scorched earth' crusade in this Promised Land ultimately bore the bitter fruit of a flawed and failed mini-empire, the Davidic monarchy.'[14] Although it is true that Abraham's and Isaac's relationships with their neighbours were largely characterised by peaceful co-existence (e.g. the Philistine acknowledgement that 'We see plainly that the LORD has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us' Genesis 26.28; cf. 21.22-23), nevertheless to contrast this neighbourly interaction with the post-Exodus conquest of the land and destruction of its inhabitants by Israel's armies under Joshua's leadership is a questionable move, effectively ignoring the repeated promise of God to the patriarchs that he will give this land to their offspring (Genesis 12.7; 13.15;

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[9] T. J. Winter, 'Introduction', in *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation,* ed. by Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter (London: T & T Clark, 2005), p. 6.
[10] Ibid.
[11] B. Breiner, 'Christian-Muslim Relations: Some Current Themes', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations,* 2 (1991), p. 77.
[12] Susan Thistlethwaite and Glen Stassen, 'Abrahamic Alternatives to War: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives on Just Peacemaking' (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2008), pp. 1-20 (p. 1).
[13] Sybil Sheridan, 'Abraham from a Jewish Perspective', in *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation,* ed. by Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and T. J. Winter (London: T & T Clark, 2005), pp. 9-17 (p. 16).
[14] Kent Davis Sensenig, 'An Abrahamic Paradigm for Just Peacemaking', *Theology, News and Notes,* 56 (Spring 2009), 3/6.

15.18-21; 17.3, 8; 26.3; 28.13). Such a move also ignores the specific notices made in the Genesis narrative of just such a future destruction of Abraham's present neighbours, who are presented as 'wicked, great sinners against the LORD' (13.13; cf. 18.20). While judgment will wait 400 years because 'the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete' (Genesis 15.13-16), this moral and religious corruption explains the drastic measures Joshua will take. Note also Joshua's warning to Israel that their end will be similar to the previous inhabitants of the land (Joshua 24.19-20).

Using scriptural teaching on humanity's common identity as *created* by God may have far more potential for furthering peace and justice than using Abraham as a common source of faith. Goodwin points to successful efforts in which 'religious leaders refer to the purposes of God for all humanity as set out in the creation narratives, and thereby expose exclusivist national ideologies as narrow and artificial constructions'.[15] Common humanity is a less problematic bond than so-called Abrahamic faith, for reasons which will become increasingly apparent as we proceed.

Challenges to Abrahamic Ecumenism

Simplistic claims that all religions are essentially the same are neither sustainable nor helpful. While the claim that all religions are one may be well-intentioned, as Prothero insists, it is 'neither accurate nor ethically responsible'.[16] Turkish theologian Ramazan Hurç argues that using Abraham as the basis for such dialogue is inadequate because the Qur'an clearly warns against it, citing the reminder in Q 3:65-67 that the scriptural books (Torah, Injil and Qur'an) were revealed after Abraham. He points out that Muslims cannot leave these books, especially the Qur'an, out of the discussion as if Abraham by himself were a basis for dialogue.[17]

Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman's call for some sort of coming together on a common platform provides an example of this difficulty:

> Religiously speaking, the high place that the Qur'an accords to the religious personalities of Abraham, Moses and others should provide an adequate basis for mutual understanding and cooperation, even though the Qur'an rejects Jewish particularism and has universalized monotheism and divine guidance, which every human being can share equally.[18]

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[15] Stephen R. Goodwin, 'Fractured Land, Healing Nations: A Contextual Analysis of the Role of Religious Faith Sodalities Towards Peace-Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina' (PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2005), p. 271.

[16] Stephen R. Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World - and Why Their Differences Matter* (New York: HarperOne), p. 3.

[17] Ramazan Hurç, 'Dinler Arası Diyalog Bağlamında Hz. Muhammed'in Hıristiyanlarla Ilişkileri (Muhammad's Relationships with Christians in the Context of Inter-Religious Dialogue)', *Firat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi (Euphrates University Journal of Social Science)*, 12 (2002), p. 392.

[18] Fazlur Rahman, 'Islam's Attitude toward Judaism', *Muslim World,* 72 (1980), p. 13.

But what Rahman calls 'Jewish particularism' is one of the most sweeping aspects of the biblical worldview expressed not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the New Testament. While Israel's God is the God of all humankind (e.g. Romans 3.29-30), the biblical story traces a particular relationship with the Jewish nation as the channel of universal blessing. The New Testament makes it clear that, as Jesus said, 'salvation is from the Jews' (John 4.22). In a passing comment Paul sums up the relationship of Gentile believers to Jewish believers by saying: 'the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings' (Romans 15.27 cf. 9.3-5; 11.11-24; Ephesians 2.11-22). When the respective scriptures on Abraham are included in the discussion, we are faced with differences that make the common ground harder to find. From a Christian standpoint, the importance of Abraham cannot be separated from the unique and particular story of Israel which culminates in Jesus the Messiah.

From a Muslim perspective, scholars like Sachedina wrestle with the problem that the Qur'an seems to provide support both for religious pluralism and for exclusivism or absolutism toward other religions.[19] Pluralism can be argued based on a verse speaking of humanity as one community (Q 2:213). But the doctrine of the 'supersession' of previous Abrahamic revelations, as a necessary result of the emergence of Muhammad, negates recognition of other religions' claims as legitimate ways of salvation. The primary way of resolving the apparent contradiction between qur'anic pluralism and exclusivism has been to argue that verses that may support toleration have been abrogated by verses that call for combating unbelief.[20] Sachedina claims that 'the principal problem that modern Muslim scholars face is deciding whether or not to accept the judgement of past scholars that qur'ānic verses which deal with interfaith relations have been abrogated'.[21]

Hashmi firmly rejects 'the notion of abrogation as an interpretive tool of the first resort'. [22] He argues that when the Qur'an is read as an integrated whole, 'the apparently belligerent verses emerge as limited in scope and application while an ethic of pluralism (best expressed in Q. 5:48) is consistently upheld'.[23] He interprets the qur'anic position as simultaneously calling various faith communities to Islam and assessing their distinctive paths as part of God's will: 'All religion (*din*) is one, but the specific rules,

[19] Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'The Qur'an and Other Religions', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an,* ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 291-309 (p. 301).
[20] Ibid., p. 299.
[21] Ibid., p. 300.
[22] Sohail H. Hashmi, 'The Qur'an and Tolerance: An Interpretive Essay on Verse 5:48', *Journal of Human Rights,* 2 (2003), p. 96.
[23] Ibid., p. 81. In fact he asserts that in this verse, 'the Qur'an affirms that the problem of religious and moral diversity is not a hindrance to be overcome, but an advantage to be embraced – a necessary facet of God's unknown plan for humanity' (p. 101).

norms, guidelines, laws (shari'a) for each community may vary.'[24] However, the distinction at issue is more than a questions of rules and laws (paths within the one religion), but rather concerns deeper matters of worldview rooted in the main storylines of each faith.

Karl-Josef Kuschel builds a systematic argument for an Abrahamic *ecumene* in which, as he puts it, 'Jews, Christians and Muslims are prepared to stop dismissing one another with polemic as 'unbelievers', 'apostates', or 'superseded'; in other words [treating one another] as brothers and sisters, in faith in the God of Abraham'.[25] I question three areas of his argument. First, his explanation of Abraham and Christianity is particularly unconvincing, especially in explaining the beginning of Christianity after Israel's failure to 'convert' under Jesus of Nazareth's teaching. He says, 'Taking up a belief in the resurrection of the dead which had been widespread since the time of apocalyptic, Jesus' followers could not give up their conviction that the crucified Jesus was alive.'[26] This is a seriously mistaken reading of the origins of the Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection as seen in the New Testament, which is inseparable from its understanding of Abraham.[27]

Kuschel's second questionable assertion is that 'in John we are confronted with the first exclusive Christianization of Abraham... Johannine pre-existence christology is the keystone in an argument about the exclusive truth needed for the Christian truth finally to be able to triumph over Jewish truth.'[28] However, from the standpoint of the New Testament, the problem is not Christian exclusion of Israel but Israel's rejection of the 'son' of Israel's God. Jesus made this inescapable in the parable of the tenants (Matthew 21.33-46). That Jesus was the Son of God is at the heart of the common New Testament kerygma.[29]

Thirdly, Kuschel too readily links *Ishmael* directly with the religion of *Islam* rather than with Ishmael's *Arab* descendants. By contrast, Arab Christian scholar Maalouf traces Ishmael through biblical history to argue that the oracle given to Hagar that Ishmael would dwell 'in the proximity/presence' of his brethren (Genesis 16.12) was a 'word of

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[24] Ibid., p. 100.

[25] Kuschel, pp. xvi-xvii. Yet the Genesis narrative underscores the reality that in God's purposes Ishmael and Isaac cannot share the inheritance. Not much peace and understanding are seen between Sarah and Hagar.

[26] Ibid., p. 72.

[27] See chapter 4 of Bristow.

[28] Kuschel, pp. 115-16.

[29] Bristow, pp. 77-79. The 'dominant approach' to John's Gospel assumed uncritically by Kuschel, which sets John at odds with the Synoptics and with history, is seriously challenged by Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). The claim of anti-Judaic attitudes in the fourth Gospel is refuted by Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Instituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), pp. 36-38.

integration rather than a word of alienation and hostility as is often believed'.[30] He notes that Ishmael's descendants were an integral part of the restoration promises of Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 42.1-10; 60.1-7; etc.). In light of the biblical outworking of the Ishmael oracles, claims of fulfilment in Islam are weak at best.[31]

Muslim arguments for Abrahamic religious ecumenism based on common *ethical monotheism* are somewhat more plausible than efforts to make the biblical Abraham serve these interests. Nevertheless, as we will see, this is done at the expense of the overall biblical narrative which ties Abraham specifically to Israel and indeed to Jesus. An example of such a 'generic Muslim' Abraham argument is expressed by Delorenzo:

> It is not a matter of favor won by an individual and passed on to others, so that a favored family develops and extends itself into a tribe, a community, a nation, a race... From the very outset, beginning with Ibrahim… this notion was put to rest… True guidance is God's guidance, and it is to be found in all the scriptures He revealed to humankind for their moral and spiritual edification… Forget the labels! Forget the pedigrees![32]

Such an approach to common identity is problematic for Jews whose scriptures are unequivocal on Abraham's multiplication by God into the nation of Israel. It is just as problematic for Christians, whose founding documents not only affirm God's choice of Israel, but also redefine monotheism by including Jesus in the identity of Israel's God,[33] thus focusing the possibility of human beings' reconciliation with God on the singular divine intervention in Jesus' death and resurrection.[34]

Christian supporters of Abrahamic ecumenism are often critical of their own tradition's appropriation of Abraham. For example, Pulcini questions the validity of the interpretation of Abraham found in the New Testament: 'Christianity re-interpreted the figure of Abraham to accommodate its needs… Why was Christ the only descendent to whom the promises applied?'[35] He ignores the appropriation of the Abraham tradition

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[30] Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids: Kregel (Academic & Professional), 2003), pp. 217-18.

[31] See the detailed study by Jonathan Culver, 'The Ishmael Promises in the Light of God's Mission: Christian and Muslim Reflections' (PhD Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001).

[32] Yusuf Talal Delorenzo, 'Ibrahim: A Family Portrait', in *Abrahamic Faiths, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts,* ed. by Paul Peachey, George F. McLean, and John Kromkowski (Washington: The Council for research in Values and Philosophy, 1997), pp. 129-37 (p. 134).

[33] See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[34] For an argument that there are no insuperable barriers to believing that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, see Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 1st edn (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 143. See however the critical review by Imad Shehadeh, 'Review of Miroslav Volf. Allah: A Christian Response', *Themelios,* 36 (2011).

[35] Theodore Pulcini, 'Of Flesh and Faith: Abraham as a Principle of Inclusion and Exclusion in Christian Thought', in *Abrahamic Faiths, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts,* ed. by Paul Peachey, George F. McLean,

by Jesus himself and apparently sees no importance in Jews receiving or rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. In Pulcini's view, Gentiles should be admitted into the Abrahamic line of blessing by faith in Christ, while Jews should be seen as already there without Christ. This wholesale jettisoning of the uniqueness, universality, and finality of Jesus as Lord and Messiah is found in many Christian efforts to widen the Abrahamic umbrella. Kuschel, for example, reduces Paul's Abraham theology to the following formula:

> Gentiles who believe in Christ become children of Abraham in the spiritual sense. Children of Abraham after the flesh, the Jews, remain children of Abraham by following the faith of Abraham, which is not trust in the 'works of the law' but trust in a God who calls into being that which is not and thus breaks through and surpasses all earthly, human, criteria and expectations.'[36]

Yet for Paul (consistent with the entire apostolic canon) there is no such difference: Jews, who have rejected Jesus as Messiah, are only 'saved' and grafted back into the Abrahamic olive tree as they confess Jesus as risen Lord, just as Gentiles must (Romans 9.1; 10.1, 9-13; 11.23). Such suppression of biblical evidence is troubling. While the recruitment of Abraham as a neutral father figure in the effort to build and maintain peace arises from laudable intentions, much of what is written stumbles over the contradictory uses to which he is put. The approaches to Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are deeply different and at many points incompatible.

These challenges to Abrahamic dialogue make it clear that bringing the respective scriptures (the Tanakh, the Bible, and the Qur'an) into careful comparative encounter is essential. Study of these scriptures yields resources for peaceful interchange and clarifies areas of deeper difference that must be respected. Some models of dialogue intentionally focus on the mutual use of these Scriptures, specifically efforts to bring about encounter between Christians and Muslims through reading and discussion of their own and each other's Scriptures.

Efforts in scriptural dialogue follow two different models: (1) those that seek a common scriptural basis for understanding differences and resolving conflicts; and (2) scriptural reasoning efforts that seek to enlighten and/or persuade those whose scriptures both overlap and differ from our own.

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and John Kromkowski (Washington: The Council for research in Values and Philosophy, 1997), pp. 115-28 (pp. 115, 17).

[36] Kuschel, p. 90. For a recent survey of many of these issues, especially in post-Holocaust European Christian thinking, see Istvan Tatai, *The Church and Israel: In Search of a New Model in Post-Holocaust Theology* (Printed by CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

Scriptural Dialogue to Resolve Conflict

Taking the first approach, we find an increasing amount of written work produced by scholars interacting with each other's texts, such as the *Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* compiled by the Society of Biblical Literature.[37] We also find Christian and Muslim leaders/scholars in public forum dialogue, such as the Doha 'building bridges' seminar in 2003 convened by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, which was an exercise in Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together.[38]

Universities increasingly offer opportunities for such scriptural encounter. For example, the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies (CMCS) aims to facilitate student dialogue over scriptures.[39] This is not an easy process, as readers of texts bring their own presuppositions to their reading. Nevertheless, it is vital for Christians and Muslims to understand each other's scriptures and take their differences as well as similarities seriously.[40]

Some of the most significant reflection on this approach comes from 'Scriptural Reasoning' (SR) movements, which pursue the practice of group reading and interacting with the Abrahamic scriptures. While its description as a 'wisdom-seeking engagement with Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures' points to a broader goal than conflict resolution narrowly defined,[41] this approach seems primarily addressed to the present Islam-West situation of conflict and the public square. Kepnes puts the goal of inter-religious conflict resolution this way:

> SR is a practice of group reading of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that builds sociality among its practitioners and releases sources of reason, compassion, and divine spirit for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world.[42]

The methodology is designed to bring into existence long-lasting arrangements in which conversations are held jointly around these three scriptures and interpretive traditions. Small groups gather from time to time to read and interpret selected texts, operating with a 'three-way mutual

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[37] See Brian M. Hauglid, 'On the Early Life of Abraham: Biblical and Qur'anic Intertextuality and the Anticipation of Muhammad', in *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality,* ed. by John C. Reeves (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 87-105.

[38] See Michael Ipgrave, *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and the Qur'an Together: A Record of the Seminar 'Building Bridges' Held at Doha, Qatar, 7-9 April 2003* (London: Church House Pub., 2004).

[39] Ida J. Glaser and Gregory M. Anderson, 'Building Respect, Seeking Truth: Towards a Model for Muslim-Christian Dialogue', *Christian Scholar's Review,* 34 (2005). See the vision and ethos of the CMCS at <http://cmcsoxford.org.uk/about-us/ethos/> [accessed 08 March 2018]

[40] See Ida J. Glaser, 'Toward a Mutual Understanding of Christian and Islamic Concepts of Revelation', *Themelios,* 7 (1982), p. 22.

[41] David F. Ford, 'An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims', *Modern Theology,* 22 (2006), p. 345.

[42] Steven Kepnes, 'A Handbook for Scriptural Reasoning', *Modern Theology,* 22 (2006), p. 367.

hospitality: each is host to the others and guest to the others as each welcomes the other two to their 'home' scripture and its traditions of interpretation'.[43] In an interesting comment that sheds light on the model as it is being practised, Ford says that 'the rabbinic debates around scripture in the Talmud… are probably the nearest traditional equivalent to scriptural reasoning'.[44]

As one guideline for scriptural reasoning Ford proposes, 'Be open to *mutual hospitality turning into friendship* – each tradition values friendship, and for it to happen now might be seen as the most tangible anticipation of future peace.'[45] Experience in Turkey has shown me that friendship is possible with Muslims who do not share my convictions, even though they are aware of my work as a missionary-theologian (the Turkish term *misyoner* is historically and politically loaded and provokes strong reactions). Peaceful neighbourly relations are possible among those of differing faith commitments, though usually the subject of religion and scriptures is avoided. Friendship works on a human level, especially when working together in job or community situations. The *institutional* setting opens possibilities for such structured, intentional scriptural dialogue in ways perhaps not so possible in day-to-day living or in familiar religious places of worship. In whatever setting, pursuing this intentionally requires a small group committed to reading together with some set of guidelines like the above.

Ford comments that 'Scriptural reasoning does not encourage anyone to become an 'expert' in scriptural reasoning, as if it were possible to know all three scriptures and their traditions of interpretation in a specialist mode.'[46] Adherents of each tradition have *their own* scriptures: Jews have the Tanakh, Christians have the New Testament, and Muslims have the Qur'an. But this assumption of 'ownership' is problematic for Christian readers who receive the Tanakh in its present form as the Word of God and read it as *their own* scripture (not that of the 'other') along with the New Testament. The situation differs for the Jewish or Muslim reader. Judaism receives neither the New Testament nor the Qur'an as divine Scripture given by the one creator God of Israel; Islam affirms books given to Moses and Jesus but generally denies that the canonical scriptures (Tanakh and New Testament) are continuous with those original books in any meaningful way. But Christians, especially perhaps Jewish Christians, affirm the right to 'host' the Tanakh/Old Testament as equal heirs with Judaism, although this right is contested by many Jewish readers who consider the New Testament

[43] Ford, p. 349.
[44] Ibid., p. 361.
[45] Ford, 'An Interfaith Wisdom', pp. 349-50.
[46] Ford, p. 357.

reading of the Tanakh to be a deviant interpretation.[47] Yet the Tanakh was the only scripture known and used by Jesus and his earliest followers. When the Jewish-Christian apostles speak of 'the sacred writings' and 'all scripture', they are referring to the Tanakh (II Timothy 3.15-16). Christians and Jews diverge from one another over two readings of the same scriptures.[48] This complicates the scriptural reasoning process. Who is the 'host' of the Tanakh? Does SR require Christians to surrender it to Jews?

Nevertheless, with the caveat that Christians claim the whole 'Bible', it seems reasonable that the adherents of each tradition be recognised as the authoritative interpreters of their own scriptures. Thus Jews represent Judaism's positions, Christians represent Christianity's position, and Muslims represent Islam's positions when explaining their relative readings of the scriptures in question.

At the end of a special issue of *Modern Theology* devoted to SR, Daniel Hardy asks:

> How can we target the deepest suppositions of the Abrahamic traditions: the patterns of the activity of the Divine, the highest reaches of humanity (reason, passion, compassionate care, love, justice, social well-being, etc.) to which we are abductively attracted by the Divine? [49]

But what does 'Abrahamic' mean here? What joins these three faiths in a common set and separates them from other world faiths? Presumably it is the doctrine of monotheistic creation, along with some notion of God's interaction with mankind through special figures like Abraham. Another common factor might be scriptures which overlap and have deep links, so that the New Testament, for example, affirms and continually quotes the Tanakh, claiming that Jesus is the fulfilment of all that it points to, and the Qur'an claims to confirm the earlier scriptures of Moses and Jesus.

However, what Hardy calls the 'deepest suppositions of the Abrahamic traditions' are mainly elements of uplifting and ennobling religious experience, which are also aspired to by adherents of non-Abrahamic religions and humanists. For the idea of something uniquely Abrahamic to be credible, defining both what is shared among these three traditions and also what distinguishes them from other worldviews, it must go beyond lofty aspirations for humanity.

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[47] Kepnes puts it this way: 'Jews do not see Christians as the rightful heir to the promises of the Torah nor do they see the New Testament as holy scriptures or revelatory for them.' Steven Kepnes, 'Hagar and Esau: From Others to Sisters and Brothers', in *Crisis, Call, and Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions,* ed. by Peter Ochs and William Stacy Johnson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 31-47 (p. 34).
[48] Bristow, pp. 99-105.
[49] Daniel W. Hardy, 'The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning', *Modern Theology,* 22 (2006), p. 533.

Christian mission and Islamic Da'wa also raise important questions for this approach.[50] Would the structured, largely interfaith and institutional setting of SR be threatened by efforts to use scriptural dialogue to persuade those of other faiths to convert? Can 'reasoning' in the SR sense include the 'reasoning from the scriptures' approach used by Paul in the synagogues and multi-religious forums of his day (Acts 17.2, 17; 18.4, 19; 19.8, 9; 24. 25), which aimed to persuade others and make disciples of Jesus Christ? Or can it include Muhammad's calling to debate with and warn unbelievers (e.g. Q 2:119), since, as Neuwirth remarks, 'debate is one of the essential elements of the Qur'ān'?[51] If not, why not? One might reject efforts at persuasion from an understandable desire to avoid the divisions and even violence that could result from the rejection of such efforts to persuade others (sometimes against the messenger and sometimes against those who refuse to heed the warning). But if the very 'DNA' of these faiths calls for mission or da'wa, how can deeper encounter avoid it? Does not love of the God of truth require it?

Two 'families' thus emerge from the mass of scriptural dialogue material and activity, distinguished by their objectives. The first pursues 'scriptural reasoning' in order to create and deepen interfaith (especially Abrahamic) relationships, which are often strained or non-existent due to conflict (e.g. conflict between Islam and the West or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). The second family of scriptural dialogue practitioners, while not rejecting these objectives, adds the purpose of witness and persuasion.

Scriptural Dialogue to Persuade

Honest involvement with our respective Abraham stories may lead to deeper communication and significant dialogue carried out for other purposes, among which is dialogue for persuasive 'witness' in mission. This purpose both includes and goes beyond the 'dialogue as critical generosity' or the 'dialogue of theological exchange' referred to in major Vatican statements on interfaith dialogue,[52] as well as going further than the SR movement deems wise or fruitful. It moves to what may be described as challenging worldview by means of honest and respectful persuasion, based on the conviction that one's own faith is valuable and even necessary for the well-

[50] Also spelled Da'wah, this refers to Islamic missionary work, preaching or 'summons' to faith. For a careful comparison of the two see David A. Kerr, 'Islamic Da'wa and Christian Mission: Towards a Comparative Analysis', *International Review of Mission,* 89 (2000).

[51] Angelika Neuwirth, 'Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an,* ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 97-114 (p. 108).

[52] Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 21.

being of the dialogue partner. Many Christians, for example, are persuaded of 'the inescapable particular, historical and exclusive dimension of the biblical revelation' and convinced of the importance of faithful witness to this revelation as part of genuine dialogue.[53]

Pursuing dialogue for witness and apologetics need not have the defensive, aggressive tenor represented by some evangelical anti-Islamic discourse in post-9/11 literature.[54] Nor does respecting differences require adoption of pluralism, as many advocates of interfaith dialogue seem to insist.

As a Christian teacher I resonate both with the need for clearer understanding of other faiths' use of Abraham for more substantial dialogue and with the goal of peaceful interfaith encounter. I see no necessary conflict between these goals and those of witness and mission. It is possible, indeed essential, to combine sensitivity and awareness of different traditions not only with authentic Christian peace-making, but also witness and even apologetics. This conviction underlies many genuine efforts for deeper encounter. Christian-Muslim peace-making or conflict transformation efforts do not necessarily lead to giving up what Reisacher describes as 'sharing God's love in Christ who died for our sins, rose again, and will return'.[55] Perhaps some ground can be staked out through a theology of religions that emphasises the *neighbour* and *hospitality*.[56]

My experience in Turkey shows that many Muslims respect openness about sincerely held faith commitments, while strongly opposing efforts to hide mission behind a cloak of interfaith dialogue. Dialogue in mission should avoid reductionist or patronising approaches to other faiths which give simplistic affirmation of their equal validity as ways to God and salvation, and the freedom of apologetics and witness must be part of healthy interfaith encounter.[57]

Dialogue based on texts which interpret the significance of Abraham so differently may well include some form of *apologetics*. This is a more controversial purpose of dialogue, entailing both the articulate defence of a position and the related goal of proving the opposing position to be wrong.

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[53] Christopher J. H. Wright, 'The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence', *Themelios,* 9 (1984), 14-15. For a recent biblical examination of perspectives on the purpose of other religions in God's providence see Daniel Strange, *'For Their Rock Is Not as Our Rock': An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2014).

[54] See Richard Cimino, "No God in Common:' American Evangelical Discourse on Islam after 9/11', *Review of Religious Research,* 47 (2005).

[55] Evelyne Reisacher, 'Evangelical-Muslim Peacemaking: Drink Lots of Cups of Tea', *Theology, News & Notes,* 56 (Spring 2009), p. 21.

[56] Barnes, pp. 237-39.

[57] John Azumah, 'The Integrity of Interfaith Dialogue', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations,* 13 (2002), 274.

Yet, interpreting the Bible honestly requires recognition of its polemical character in the face of the religions with which its human authors were in contact. As Wright states, 'The Bible makes remarkably universal claims in the midst of this religious plurality in relation to the revealing and saving effect of particular events.'[58] Certainly the New Testament enjoins witness and world-wide proclamation of the Gospel as an essential aspect of its message. Similarly, the Qur'an's polemical, debating approach is one of its most well-known characteristics.[59] Citing Q 6:125, the London Central Mosque issued a fatwa encouraging Muslim participation in Abrahamic scriptural dialogue with this reminder: 'According to the teaching of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad – Peace be upon him and all Prophets – Muslims are commanded to call to the way of Allah with wisdom and good admonition.'[60]

There is New Testament precedence for 'reasoning with' (διαλέγομαι) people from different religious backgrounds to convince them of the truth concerning Christ (e.g. Acts 17.2, 17; 18.4, 19; 19.8-9). Stackhouse spells out what this persuasive reasoning might look like under the title of *humble apologetics*, arguing that 'the majority of Christians ever since have followed this pattern of constructive engagement with the ideas and minds of their day, in order that 'by all means I may save some' (I Corinthians 9.22).'[61]

Three significant goals can be identified for sincere and open dialogue conducted for mission and apologetics: (1) Substantial and respectful mutual understanding; (2) Mutual sharpening of understanding of each party's own texts and convictions; (3) Persuasion of dialogue partners to positions different from previously held, including conversion. The Abrahamic narrative is a good point for this process to begin, especially if the arena is credibly to be called Abrahamic Dialogue.

Abrahamic Dialogue and Contextual Missiology

Can Abrahamic interfaith dialogue serve contextual missiology? It is in fact at the heart of it. Taking people seriously as made in the image of God and engaging them humbly and honestly as our neighbours goes hand-in-hand with the learning process basic to interfaith witness. The further we advance into conversation that is authentically 'Abrahamic' in more than name, the

[58] Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Interpreting the Bible among the World Religions', *Themelios,* 25 (2000), p. 47.
[59] See Neuwirth, p. 108.
[60] <http://www.scripturalreasoning.co.uk/fatwa_english.pdf.> [accessed 08 March 2018]
[61] John G. Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 127.

more we are forced to grapple with the Abrahamic texts of the Bible and the Qur'an.

Yet much interfaith dialogue is not particularly 'Abrahamic' except in name. My most profound discomfort has been with some Christian contributors, who seem so ready to abandon Jesus as the messianic son of Abraham to embrace an ethical monotheism in the interest of ecumenism. As a Christian I am persuaded that the sacred text points to one overarching narrative moving from the particularity of God's call of Abraham to his universal blessing of all peoples through the one particular man, Jesus the true son of Abraham, ultimate heir and fulfiller of the patriarchal promise. Thus dialogue should not be limited to the pursuit of peace, justice, and reciprocal enrichment, although these are valid goals for dialogue. But if the goals of Abrahamic interaction are understood by both partners as mutual understanding, better communication, and even effective persuasion, it is also essential to articulate clearly the Christian perspective.

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