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## Local Gods and Universal Faiths

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## Abraham and Universal Faith\*

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Harran is an ancient city in southeastern Turkey near the Syrian border. When our bus arrives there children dressed in brightly-covered clothing pour out of the mud and straw “beehive” houses to greet us. We descend the hillside to ruins of the old city where Abraham had lived centuries ago.

We make our way through the crowds past television cameras and security guards armed with guns and cell phones. We sit under a large open tent amidst the ruins. Our group includes Jewish rabbis and scholars from Israel (including an Israeli family with two young boys) a Muslim journalist from Tanzania and the papal nuncio from the Vatican. We have Syrian Orthodox nuns from Iraq, Muslims from Turkey, Protestants and Catholics from Europe and three Americans: a retired clergyman, a priest now teaching in Istanbul, and a sociologist.

Soon the patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church arrives from Istanbul, formerly Constantinople the capital of the Eastern Empire for more than a thousand years and a battleground for many of the Crusades of the Middle Ages. He is followed by the head of the Russian Council of Muftis, other Muslim religious leaders, a head rabbi, the provincial governor, a member of parliament and other dignitaries, each new arrival greeted by a rush of cameras and reporters.

The occasion is an interfaith symposium on Abraham, the founder of all three western religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As a leader of the sponsoring Interfaith Dialogue Platform puts it, the gathering is the first of its kind in the 5,000-year history of Harran. Men’s choirs sing ancient Jewish and Muslim prayers and a girl’s choir sings in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. The conference is front-page news because the leaders of these ancient traditions are meeting not to insult or shoot one another but to celebrate their common heritage. Its goal is no less than to think about how Jews, Christians, and Muslims can learn to appreciate each other and to live together in peace. The relationship between religion and war, between faith and peace, is an important and complicated one.

In today’s global village we (especially those of us who are Americans) think that something 100 years old is an antique. Radio stations play “oldies” from only 20 years ago, but for the people of Harran the last 500 years are recent history. Humans have been on this planet for a long time and we have changed the way we live in many ways. Most people have lived in relative isolation throughout much of our history, but during the twentieth century all of that changed. Now we all live in the same

place. People have always been in contact with other civilizations through trade and war, but the scale and scope of such encounters has increased exponentially in the modern world.

We have therefore, in a sense now all inherited the world’s faith traditions. Our friendships and colleagues at work are not the people in our tribe or village, but include people from around the world and from a variety of cultures and faith traditions. Most humans interpret the world through a religious lens (unlike many people in modern colleges and universities). Most people worship God with a perspective similar to that of their ancient ancestors and with rituals that go back thousands of years. Their faith shapes their daily lives and gets them through life’s crises; it helps them to interpret the origin and meaning of the cosmos and to understand their place in it. Religious traditions provide the moral bedrock and ethical training of entire civilizations and guide people through life cycle changes such as birth, puberty, marriage and death; they teach people how to wage war and how to make peace.

During the 5,000 years that people have lived in Harran we have gotten very good at war. We are now so good at fighting that we threaten to blow each other up with nuclear weapons or some other form of mass destruction still on the drawing boards. One major question is: will our religious traditions and institutions justify the continued use of militaries to solve our large-scale problems or they help us find a path to peace?

Each of the major traditions has two competing ethical motifs regarding the use of force: the warrior and the pacifist. For the warrior – from Joshua of the ancient Hebrews to Arjuna in South Asian epics – God calls on people to stand up and fight as a religious duty. Religious leaders have called on people to fight for God and country, have blessed the troops and have buried the war dead as heroes. For the pacifist, killing is wrong. Most of the early Christians, for example, were strict pacifists who believed that Jesus taught them to love their enemies. “It is better to be slain than to slay,” argued the prominent early Christian Tertullian who condemned even the use of violence in self-defense. Soldiers who converted to Christianity were allowed to remain in the army, but only if they were taught not to kill even when commanded to do so.

In the East, especially in Buddhism and Jainism, the first principle of an ethical life has always been *ahimsa*, or nonharmfulness. Followers of the Buddha were encouraged to give up violence and even the pursuit of material pleasures for a life of prayer and meditation, of compassion for all creatures. He created monasteries that encouraged people to drop out of society, avoid the military, and devote their lives to prayer and meditation.

At about the same time as the invention of the atom bomb, Mohandas Gandhi refashioned the ancient teachings of the world’s religious teachings into a

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powerful tool for nonviolent social change. From the warrior tradition, Gandhi took the idea of standing up and fighting for good against evil as a religious duty. From the pacifist motif, Gandhi took the notion of not harming anyone, even one's opponents.

Gandhi's ideas might seem to be the idealistic ramblings of a holy man if it were not for the Indian Freedom Movement. Gandhi mobilized the people of India to challenge the might of the British colonial empire, the largest superpower of his day that controlled much of the world with its mighty navy and colonial administration. Gandhi argued that any system of power, no matter how seemingly invulnerable, relied upon the cooperation of its subjects. He also believed that the power of tyrants is nothing compared to that of God; he used prayer and fasting to strengthen his own resolve and to mobilize all of India to challenge the might of the British empire. At the same time, he challenged conventional wisdom about the need to use violence in order to obtain or maintain power. He drew upon his own tradition of Hinduism, but also Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam to develop a philosophy of nonviolence and to create strategies of nonviolent insurgency that toppled the colonial power of his time without violence.

All of the world's religions have at one time or another promoted killing and denounced everyone who believed differently from their own tradition. We may need to find some way, like Abraham and Gandhi, to break with aspects of the past but build new institutions of faith upon ancient cultural foundations.

The life of Abraham, whom we were meeting to discuss amidst the ancient ruins of Harran, was remarkable in many ways. Although he is considered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims to be the model man of faith, people of his own day considered him a rebel, perhaps even anti-religious. He broke with many of the ancient religious practices of his own family and at the age of 75 left his family's homeland and migrated to another region.

A sociological perspective, with its focus on power relations and the connections between theories of the cosmos and types of social structure, sheds an interesting light on the story of Abraham and his wives Sarah and Hajar. It illuminates 3,000 years of history and the relationship between their time and ours. Like us, they lived in a time of economic, social, and cultural change. Rather than the dawn of the information age, they lived in the beginning of the agricultural era. New developments in the economy were changing everything; wandering tribes were beginning to settle down in villages and even small cities. People were trading across large distances, pushing back the boundaries of the unknown, and witnessing the migration of much of the population around the so-called "Fertile Crescent" east of the ancient Mediterranean Sea. These two

contradictory trends – of settling down, on the one hand, and moving, on the other, were great historical movements that affected the nature of human life and beliefs about God for millennia to come.

Economic and cultural change always go hand-in-hand and ideas about God and methods of making a living ("modes of production") affect and change one another. As people began to change their ways of living, they also developed different images of God; changing theologies in turn promoted different ways of life. Hunting and gathering societies, for example, envision multiple and sometimes equally important gods and spirits to reflect their own conditions of equality and mutual interdependence. Agricultural societies are more hierarchical, so the gods get organized into hierarchies of importance and power. The end product is monotheism and universalism. At Abraham's time most gods were considered local and were associated with a single place. There were many gods, each of them representing different aspects of reality such as natural forces and even clans. Some were believed to protect cities (like Helen of Troy, just west of Harran), others were clan gods, often represented as statues (or "idols"). Like all the great prophets and spiritual leaders of human history, Abraham built on the faith of his ancestors, but also forged dramatic innovations – and got in trouble for doing so.

According to the traditions, Abraham rejected the common idea that God belonged to one clan or lived in one place. He believed that God told him to migrate with his family to another place just as his father Terah, who was probably born in Ur but died in Harran, had. Abraham was convinced that God would go with them and that God told him to change his name from Abram to Abraham. According to the Hebrew scriptures (Genesis 12:1-3)

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

According to the Islamic tradition, Abraham left Harran because of religious persecution. It must have been a scene of intense conflict; according to the tradition, the king tried to execute Abraham in Sanliurfa (near Harran) for his rebellion against local religious practices. Abraham escaped miraculously and left the country. He was not bitter, however, and prayed to God to bless his father and the family he left behind. He laid the foundations for the monotheism and universalism that emerge in the later traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

As an immigrant in new lands, he was forced to change his perspective about many things including

ideas about God. Abraham's encounters with cultures other than the one in which he was raised probably stimulated a great deal of thinking. He may have changed his opinion about the meaning of life, the nature of the universe, and the religious rituals he had practiced growing up; as his experience broadened his cultural outlook became less local and more universal. The trend toward universalism in Abraham's thinking is, of course, widespread in the modern world in which people on the other side of the globe seem much closer to us than they did even a generation ago. Universalism reflects the growth of ties between societies, the growth of relations between different types of people, and the need to build new nations out of disparate ethnic, racial, and religious groups.

Abraham, Sarah and Hajar believed that their God was not a local clan god, but the Creator of the universe who was full of love and compassion for "all the families of the earth." It is no accident that as Abraham and his family left their birthplace and traveled to meet other peoples and cultures, they changed their ideas about God and about people, as do many immigrants in our time. They were open-minded and generous in their attitude toward others and were convinced that God would bless them as they migrated.

Abraham also believed that God provided all the basic necessities and blessings of life: food, land, even children. That did not distinguish him much from his ancestors, except that Abraham believed that the God he worshipped was the God of all creation and blessed all people. Another breakthrough in religious practice that came with Abraham may also have been related to his experience and status as an immigrant. Since migration forces people to rethink old cultural practices as they encounter new ones that may be what happened to Abraham in the events described in Genesis. The story is a dramatic one celebrated everywhere in western art and literature. As an old man, despite the promise of many descendants, Abraham was childless. At first he had a son Ishmael from a second wife, according to the tradition an Egyptian woman named Hajar who had been his wife's slave. Then, at the age of 100, his 90-year-old first wife Sarah gave birth to Isaac.

The traditions disagree as to which son was involved, but Abraham believed that God told him to make a human sacrifice and Abraham climbed a mountain with his son with wood and a knife and prepared to do so. Just as he was about to kill his son, he heard an angel of the Lord commanding him not to do it. He saw a ram caught in a thicket and substituted it for his son, renouncing the violence of human sacrifice that was probably widespread at the time.

Those of us who gathered in Harran, and later in Sanliurfa and Istanbul for the Abraham symposium gained a new sense of our 3,000-year common heritage. Despite the fact that Jews, Christians and Muslims have

been killing each during the past few centuries, they share common ancestors and belief in the same God.

As I watched the gathering with a sociological eye, it seemed to me that the parallels between the social transformations of Abraham's time and of ours were striking: in both eras people were encountering one another across diverse cultures. They were creating new ways of thinking about the world and of living together. I also wondered what new spiritual movements might emerge from the turmoil of the 21st century and whether they would help the people of our time to overcome destructive beliefs and violent practices and to live more meaningful, peaceful lives like Abraham did in his day.

I wondered whether a new universalism similar to Abraham's vision would help us figure out how to live together in a global village booby-trapped for self destruction. I was thinking about these things when my mother called from Kansas to wish me a happy birthday. I told her all about our wonderful experiences, about the symposium, and how everyone had been so warm and hospitable to us in this ancient land of Abraham.