

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Abraham is father of the faith for Jews, Christians, Muslims

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Judaism, Christianity and Islam are called the Abrahamic faiths, because each tradition sees Abraham as a pivotal figure in its history.

For Jews, Abraham is seen as the one from whom all Jews are descended. Abraham is the father of Isaac and grandfather of Jacob, who is renamed Israel and whose 12 sons represent the tribes of Israel.

Abraham is called by God to go into a new land and in a covenant is declared to be the "father of multitudes." In Genesis, the first book of the Torah, God makes this promise: "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless

you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Genesis 13:2)

For Christians, Abraham is seen as the "father of the faith" and is honored for his obedience. The Apostle Paul expands the concept of being a descendent of Abraham when he writes in his letter to the Galatians: "So also Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."

So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:6-9, NIV)

In Islam, Abraham, called Ibrahim in the Quran, is honored for his obedience and submis-

sion to Allah and is considered one of the prophets. As one of the most frequently named persons in the Quran, Abraham is called a friend of God and an example for all mankind.

If all three religions call Abraham the father of the faith, how is it that these three "children of Abraham" are so often in conflict? Is it just sibling rivalry or are the three in fundamental disagreement?

SIBLING RIVALRY TURNS TO VIOLENCE

Jonathan Sacks in his recent book, "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence," points to the stories of sibling rivalry and even fratricide in our scriptures. In Genesis, we read of the first act of worship where the difference offerings by the two brothers, Cain and Abel, led to the first recorded murder in

scripture. Sibling conflict also appears between Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and the brothers of Joseph who sold him into slavery.

But we also note that within each of the separate traditions there are divisions that can lead to violence. Whether it is Sunni vs. Shi'a Muslims, or Catholics vs. Protestants in Northern Ireland, tensions within can be as volatile as conflicts between religious communities.

While one can find differences between and within these three Abrahamic traditions, there is also much in common. All three acknowledge God as the creator of the universe, believe that humans are created in the image of God, teach that we must be kind to the stranger, and preach humility and the importance of love and forgiveness. The differences are apparent and can be

the focus of our attention. But we also can choose to find what we have in common and seek harmony, understanding and peace.

Much of what is at stake is in reality more political than religious. It is the task of the interfaith effort to contribute to the healing of some of these divisions. While the political divisions might seem insurmountable, the religious divisions can be addressed as we seek to recognize the image of God in someone who might not look like me, have the same color skin as me, dress like me or worship like me.

We are all children of God, made in God's image. We may not think alike or understand God in the same way, yet we are called to love each other. That is the core of interfaith understanding.

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