



Texas Faith and Order Conference Discusses Role of Abraham in Three Faiths

31.03.2004

The meaning of Abraham to Christians, Jews, and Muslims was the subject of the 38th Annual Faith and Order Conference of the Texas Conference of Churches (TCC), held November 5-6, 2003, in Flower Mound, Texas, under the title "Abraham: Three Faiths, One Ancestor." The conference opened with a welcome by Rev. James Tingle, Co-Chair of the TCC Christian Unity and Interfaith Relations Commission. Sixty-two Christians, Jews, and Muslims were in attendance, making this the largest Faith and Order Conference attendance in a decade. Dr. Carol Worthing, TCC Executive Director, presented "Principles for Religious Dialogue" as outlined by John L. Allen Jr., a Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter, a copy of which was available to each participant. Rev. Tingle introduced Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis of Congregation Kol Ami in Flower Mound, who was the first of three speakers to address the meaning of Abraham as ancestor in the three faiths, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

The Jewish Tradition

Rabbi Dennis began with an analogy from his own family experience illustrating how even siblings experience their parents in a different light. "Everybody has a different take on Abraham," said Dennis. "Everyone tells the same story a little differently, and everybody draws different conclusions from the same encounter." Dennis spoke about Abraham in the Torah as a "flawed genius," in his inability to manage and protect his family, especially in the conflict between Sarah and Hagar over the future of his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Yet, for Jews, Rabbi Dennis told the group, the Biblical Abraham shows his greatness in many ways, including:

- In a harsh and brutal time and place, he is the personification of kindness, welcoming anonymous strangers into his tent (Genesis 18).
- His life is built upon trust in God. He endures ten trials, from the abandonment of his home in old age to the near sacrifice of his son; his faith in God's beneficent will is unsurpassed (Genesis 12:22).
- Though he is obedient to God's will, his faith is not blind. Rather it is a faith both critical and reflective, as his famous confrontation with God on the road to Sodom and Gemorrah illustrates (Genesis 18).
- He is the personification of loving grace, arguing to save not only the righteous inhabitants of Sodom, but its mass of criminals and sinners also. (Genesis 18)

Through Rabbinic literature Jews have expanded the terse accounts found in Genesis, revealing

an Abraham who is a prophet and a philosopher. Mystical/Kabbalistic works highlight Abraham's compassion, regarding him as the actual incarnation of God's love in the world. In later Kabbalah, such as the Sefer Zohar, Abraham as a person has all but vanished. He is rather a symbol of divine imminence. Hasidic masters relocate him in their own primary concern over the struggle of the imperfect individual to live a godly life, restoring Abraham as the everyman.

Stating that he had only touched on the vast and complex Judaic literature about Abraham, Dennis concluded by asking conference participants, though each comes from a different faith tradition, to receive one another in confidence and faith, and to "drink together from the many wells of Abraham."

A period of questions and answers followed each of the presentations. Many questions were asked about the customs of the three traditions. The leaders explored subtleties of language and worship styles as well as continuing the dialogue about differences and commonalities in the way we look at Abraham. Small group discussions followed each question and answer period. The small groups were formed randomly with an attempt to have at least one Jew, Christian and Muslim in each group. Here participants were able to delve deeper, exploring other traditions in a more personal manner. For many, these groups formed the most meaningful part of the event.

The Muslim Tradition

The second speaker, Imam Yusuf Kavakci of the Islamic Association of North Texas and the Dallas

Central Mosque in Richardson, opened by greeting us with the words, "Salaam, peace be upon you." Stating that Rabbi Dennis had paved the way for him and that Rev. Skinner would complete the thoughts, he welcomed us to Islam. "We don't mind hugging you all. We believe Islam was the religion of Adam, it became Eve's religion and all descendants coming from Adam and Eve, the prophets, kings, and leaders had one religion, including Abraham, Moses, Noah, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, and Mohamed, who was the prophet who received Qur'an," said Kavakci, who sees humanity as one. All have one God, one religion and one nation. He considers all faithful people of Abrahamic faiths to be "in Islam." Speaking about the meaning of Abraham to Muslims, Imam Kavakci stated he was one of the arch prophets, a messenger in the historical context. He spoke of Abraham the child, looking up at the sky, trying to figure out who or what is God; not the stars, moon, or sun for they all disappear, but that there must be something above the heavens. Kavakci cited the story of the boy Abraham breaking his father's idols as a declaration of the one God. For Muslims the story does not end there but emphasizes that Abraham tries to communicate with his father, asks him to accept one God. He knows he is on the right path and his father is not, but he prays for his father. Muslims also see meaning in the story of the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre. The story speaks of hospitality, the welcoming of guests, and the offering of the best food to them. In the Muslim story God orders Abraham to kill Ishmael, not Isaac, and, Kavakci emphasized, Muslims do not take the story of Sarah and Hagar as one about womanizing or adultery. Rather Abraham is married to Hagar and he tries to establish Hagar and Ishmael far away from Sarah to solve the family conflict. To do this he must submit them to danger, but in all Abraham is listening to God. This story also connects with the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims, for while Hagar is looking for water, baby Ishmael, lying nearby, kicks his feet in the sand and water gushes out, forming "Zam-Zam," two rivers that are part of the annual Mecca pilgrimage rituals.

For Muslims these stories tell of Abraham as an arch prophet and an important role model of how a Muslim should submit to God. Kavakci later explained that Muslim means "someone who submits to God." Finally, he said, "Abraham is Islam, and Mohammed's genealogy is traced back to him through Hagar and Ishmael."

The Christian Tradition

The Rev. Dr. Douglas Skinner, Senior Minister of Northway Christian Church, began by

acknowledging that most of the conference participants, being Christian, were to some extent experts on the Christian view of Abraham. He was challenged to present new information. Relating the camp activity of leading a blindfolded person on a trust walk, he spoke of Christianity as a faith religion, noting that faith involves first knowledge of content, then assent to that content, and finally trust. Christians see Abraham as the "Father of Faith" (Genesis 15:6) with seventy one such references in the New Testament. The New Testament contains two substantial biographical sketches of Abraham, one as part of salvation history (Acts 7:1-8) and the other listing Abraham in the hall of fame of people of faith (Hebrews 11:8-22). The shape of Abraham's life is discussed throughout the New Testament. Particularly important to Christians is God's call to journey in faith (Hebrews 11:8-10) which Abraham modeled.

Christians see Abraham in three ways. First, he is a clue to who Christians believe Jesus to be. New Testament genealogies of Jesus have him as the offspring of Abraham, a part of God's promise made to Abraham that he will bear fruit. In John (8:58) there is the quote "before Abraham I am," a cryptic reference to Yhwh's saying "I am" in the Hebrew scriptures when Moses asked the Lord's name. Second, Abraham stands as an example of how Christians understand saving faith. Abraham believed God and was saved, and could be said to be the spiritual father of all who believe. Third, Abraham is a clue to what Christians believe happens after death. He is frequently portrayed as a fellow guest at the heavenly banquet and in Christian images of the afterlife. After the final meetings of the small groups, Muslims gathered for evening prayers before breaking the day-long fast of Ramadan. During this same time period Christians participated in Lectio Divina, a way of praying through scripture reading and reflection, using a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures about Abraham.

Then participants gathered for a Middle Eastern buffet, sampling foods such as kafta, babaganoush, humus, shish chicken, falafel, and various pickles, salads, sauces, and bread. Desert included two kinds of Middle Eastern pastry and coffee. The evening concluded with an interfaith service, which featured a version of the Lord's Prayer interlineated with parts of prayers central to the Jewish and Muslim traditions, as crafted by J.A.H. Futterman.

The next morning the program began with traditional morning worship led by Rabbi Dennis as it is practiced by Reformed Jews. This was followed by a panel in which a Christian, Muslim, and Jew told about interfaith experiences they have shared as part of congregations or as individuals.

Panel Response

Rev. Jack Soper, a United Methodist minister, began by pointing out that people of all three faiths hold in common a will for peace. He asked us to call forward that which is blessed within, our

common ground, and be peacemakers, together.

Rev. Soper outlined the interfaith initiatives that his congregation has taken since 9/11. Right after that event he consulted with Imam Kavakci. Recognizing the need for conversation between Muslims and Christians, the two leaders planned a shared meal at Kavakci's mosque followed by each congregation going to a separate location for prayers. About 70 Christians attended and together with Muslims from the mosque, talked about what they might do together to overcome the prevailing fear.

Then 90 Muslims came to Soper's church where over a vegetarian meal there was more conversation. Muslims offered a prayer before the meal and after all joined in interfaith worship. One Muslim shared that "until tonight I believed that all Christians were fundamentalists." Christians admitted that they tended to think of all Muslims as being extremists but that through these conversations they had come to know Muslims as faithful people like themselves. Relationships grew and by Thanksgiving the two congregations decided to collect food together for the local food pantry. Later they worked to renew the environment, putting plants in the ponds of a local park. Members of both congregations have come to know and love each other. A month ago they gathered for a picnic and there are plans for more joint activities.

Rev. Soper called for all to engage in the risky business of peacemaking. He noted that in his twenty years in the TCC, working together with Christians from many different communions, there always have been some areas of conflict. Even in the most sacred moment for Christians, that of Holy Communion, when we feel closest to God, our differences keep us apart. Christians continue to struggle to come to the table together and find peace. "Before us," said Soper, "is the challenge to be peacemakers, in a world where there are radicals who will stand in the way. We must stand together to bring peace, because we have a common creator, and he calls us to peace by loving us."

Ms. Merve Kavakci, daughter of Imam Kavakci, and a politician who is studying medicine, began by saying, "May peace be upon you." She spoke of the privilege she felt to stand before a group that looked beyond her appearance, particularly the wearing of "hijab," the traditional Muslim head scarf. Ms. Kavakci made world news in 1999 when, newly elected to the Turkish Parliament, she was denied the oath of office and booed from the chamber for wearing the scarf. She is very grateful for the liberties and freedoms she enjoys in the United States.

Ms. Kavakci said, "On 9/11 a religion was hijacked." It is with sadness that she has watched Islam become associated with extremism and terrorism. "It is hard to be a Muslim in many parts of the world," she said. "Especially when politicians say, 'Either you are with us or against us.'" She sees the biggest problem as the lack of information. She understands the difficulty the average rural American might find in differentiating a terrorist from the average Muslim. One good thing that has come out of 9/11 is the opportunity to do education. Ms. Kavakci has been part of many interfaith activities. Yet, innocent Muslims are suffering harassment and incarceration under the Patriot Act. She asked conference participants to return to their communities and work locally to end these violations of human rights.

Helena Shapp-Dossey, educational director for Congregation Kol Ami in Flower Mound, began by saying she has experienced many interfaith conferences and events. "Some have not gone nearly as well as this one," she said. She grew up in East Dallas, the only Jewish child in her elementary and junior high school, and one of only a few in her high school. She did not have much chance to share about her tradition in those years but as an adult she began to step out of her comfort zone and make occasions for dialogue. For years now she has spoken about Jewish tradition to non-Jewish congregations in the Denton area. She finds that teens already have stereotypes, but they can be broken down with education and contact with people of other traditions. She has taught Hebrew to multi-faith groups and conducted Passover Seders with Christian congregations and interfaith groups. Ms. Shapp-Dossey believes it is good that we are becoming a smaller world, dispelling myths, exploring the commonalities between our faiths, and helping our children to know each other.

There followed discussion of the need for more contact, especially chances to work together on shared goals like healing the environment. Imam Kavakci mentioned the need for academies in Texas where all three traditions can be studied separately and together. Conversations about

dispelling myths are critical to today's interfaith task. The final plenary discussion touched on struggles we hold in common as people of faith and concluded with a reminder from Dr. Worthing that the word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek oikumene and means "the whole household of God."

A Christian prayer service closed the conference. Participants left expressing their pleasure at a conference that modeled affectionate and respectful hospitality. For these are the Abrahamic ingredients necessary to building trustful interfaith relationships within the communities where we live out our faith traditions, across the state of Texas.