STUDIES IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

PEETERS

12 / 2002 / 2

ALON GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN

ABRAHAM AND 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS' IN CONTEMPORARY INTERRELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

Reflections of an Implicated Jewish Bystander

Introduction

In April 2000 I was invited by the Turkish Writers' Association to an interfaith conference that was to take place at Haran. The topic of the gathering was Abraham—a figure who was said to provide a bridge between the three traditions invited to that conference—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Indeed, these three traditions are often referred to as 'Abrahamic'. As I reflected upon the theme, I became increasingly uneasy with the implied assumptions of the topic. I became less and less certain that Abraham is indeed the figure that could provide common ground for the troubled relations between the three religions that recognize his significance. The present article grows out of the address delivered on that memorable occasion. It explains why, from my understanding of the Jewish perspective, the choice of Abraham as an interfaith symbol is problematic. At the very least, one should take great care and precision in defining in what sense one appeals to the figure of Abraham in such a context.

Abraham and Abrahamic Religions

It has become a commonplace in interfaith discussions to relate to the figure of Abraham as a common point of reference for Christians, Muslims and Jews. The figure of Abraham serves as a focus for interreligious rapprochement. Not only is the figure of Abraham considered a meeting point, but the three religions have during the past decade or so increasingly been referred to by the adjective 'Abrahamic'. This adjective seems to have been introduced to a large extent as an alternative to referring to these three religions as 'monotheistic', or better yet 'great monotheistic' religions. While I cannot document this change in nomenclature with precision, it seems the change is motivated by two factors. The first is the desire to avoid the suggestion that only these three religions are monotheistic. Out of deference to other, primarily Eastern, religions, a different term has gradually been adopted, as a common descriptive umbrella, under which Judaism, Christianity and Islam

should all feel comfortable. The second, and related, reason seems to be the desire to address other factors that unite these three religions, beyond their common belief in one God. Reference to the three religions as 'Abrahamic' provides a sense of common history, or at least common story, and a common spiritual paternity. Based on this common paternity, the three religions should be classified together not only on account of their interrelated history of dialogue, dispute, Nor support and competition, primarily in the West, for nearly a millennium and a half. It is not only theologically that they are similar, as 'monotheistic' might suggest. Rather, by classifying them as 'Abrahamic' the suggestion is made that the three religions form a family within the wider body of humanity's religions. Consequently, the three religions can be spoken of as 'Children of Abraham'.[1] The establishment of this family relationship does not stem so much from a history-of-religions type enquiry but from the implied understanding that both past behavior and the call for better future behavior in their mutual relations should be appreciated in light of the recognition of a family relationship. In an atmosphere of interfaith cooperation, the designation 'Abrahamic' emerges carrying within it the suggestion not only of a shared story, but also of an ideal harmonious relationship that should characterize adherents of the three faiths, emanating, as it were, from a common branch.

Purpose of Present Investigation

Both references to Abraham as a figure that is relevant for interfaith sharing and the designation of the three religions as 'Abrahamic' have received little reflection from the Jewish perspective. While Jews, including myself, have comfortably used the figure and the designation in the context of interfaith work, the roots of this usage seem to actually be grounded historically first in Christian circles and then in Muslim usage. I wish to take the present occasion to reflect upon the implications, from a Jewish perspective, of this usage of the figure of Abraham and the reference to the three religions as 'Abrahamic'.

My main argument will be that these uses, particularly the latter, are problematic from a Jewish perspective. It would be preferable to find neutral descriptive categories, that emerge from the scientific study of religion, rather than to employ theological categories that express the bias of one or more of the religions involved but do not reflect equally the theological understanding of all three religions. Towards the end of this paper I will point

[1] See, for example, the title of Peters, 1982: *Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. While nothing is made in the book of this common heritage, the choice of classifying the three religions in this way reveals profound assumptions regarding how the three religions ought to relate to one another.

to some recent work, suggesting it provides us with a significant alternative to the designation of these three religions as 'Abrahamic'.

The questions I pose concerning the presentation of the figure of Abraham as a meeting point for the three religions as well as in relation to the use of the adjective 'Abrahamic' should obviously not be taken as a rejection of the enterprise of rapprochement between the three religions. What follows is only intended to explore the hidden assumptions and the problems that are attendant upon our linguistic usage. Having exposed these difficulties we may nevertheless decide to maintain this usage. Oftentimes, a misconstrued notion may be more useful than it is accurate.[2] However, if we come to the conclusion that 'Abrahamic' is useful despite its difficulties, and that it is preferable to the suggestion I will make at the end of this paper, then this paper will serve the purpose of forcing us to define the sense in which 'Abrahamic' is used. Since 'Abrahamic' is not a strictly descriptive history-of-religions type category but a suggestive category created to serve a particular interreligious ideology, the following discussion may be useful for a clarification of the possible sense in which it may be used when taking into account the Jewish tradition.

One final clarification regarding the purpose of this paper. I shall not offer here a summary of the meaning of the figure of Abraham in all three traditions. Some of the sources indicated in the notes do just that and more can be found in the literature. My goal is to explore the relevance of the figure of Abraham for interreligious dialogue, as well as to reflect upon the usefulness of the reference to Judaism, Christianity and Islam as 'Abrahamic'. Reference to the ways in which the figure of Abraham is employed in the three religions will be limited to the interreligious potential of such uses. Finally, in view of the fact that two distinct, if interrelated, matters under discussion here—the figure of Abraham, and the designation of the religions as 'Abrahamic'—the reader may find herself evaluating these two issues differently.

Abraham in the Jewish Tradition
Resources for Interreligious Understanding

A starting point for the present discussion will be an examination of ways in which the figure of Abraham is presented in Jewish sources of different periods. This examination will enable us to locate those uses that could be relevant to an interreligious context, allowing us a better understanding of the meaning that could be attached from a Jewish perspective to the prevalent use

[2] David Gordis, in reaction to my thesis, drew attention to our usage of 'Judeo-Christian Tradition' as a useful term, despite its acknowledged inherent difficulties.

of 'Abraham' and 'Abrahamic'. In thinking of the relevance of Abraham to interreligious dialogue, several aspects of the person of Abraham come to mind, representing different periods of Jewish reflection. Most significant for our discussion is the distinction between biblical and post-biblical views of Abraham. The biblical view of Abraham is characterized by the notions of election and covenant. Abraham is made the father of a race with whom a covenant is made. This covenant establishes a relationship between God and Abraham's offspring, promising the land of Israel to the newly formed people. It is most significant to note that in the biblical story it is God who chooses Abraham, probably on account of his spiritual qualities, rather than the reverse. As Nehemiah 9:7 states: "You are the Lord God who has chosen Abram, and taken him out of Ur Kasdim, and called his name Abraham, and found his heart faithful unto You."

In placing the emphasis upon divine election, I point to a fact that is noteworthy in the biblical story. Nowhere in the Bible is Abraham presented as rejecting idolatry.[3] In fact, as Yehezkel Kaufmann (1960: 222) has pointed out, the book of Genesis, where Abraham's story is told, tells its story in a world devoid of idolatry. Hence, no battle against idolatry is to be found in it. The biblical story of Abraham is not a story of Abraham's faith, but of the divine election of Abraham, the establishment of a covenant, and the attendant promises, primary among which is the land of Israel. This image of Abraham remains central to all forms of post-biblical Jewish thought. It finds expression in the daily liturgy. The first benediction of the Amidah, the core Jewish prayer, recited at least thrice daily, addresses God through his particular relationship with Abraham, the father of the community gathered in prayer: "Blessed are You Lord, Our God and the God of our Fathers, The God of Abraham .... Blessed are you Lord, Shield of Abraham".

There is something fundamentally limiting in this image of Abraham, originating in the Bible and carried through all generations of Jewish life down to present times. Abraham is the father of the Jewish people. His presence and merit accompany the people of Israel through the toils of their complicated history. From biblical story down to later liturgy, the story of Abraham is viewed through the prism of the lineage passed on through Isaac and Jacob. Like the biblical story itself, later generations too consider Abraham from an exclusivist perspective, related to their covenant and their unique history. If,

[3] This, I believe, holds true for the reference to Abraham in Joshua 24 as well. Nickelsburg (1998: 157) finds in Joshua 24 the motif of the rejection of idolatry along with the election of Abraham. I prefer the reading of Yehuda Liebes (2000). According to this reading, the verse emphasizes Abraham's removal from the land of his forefathers, rather than his rejection of their idolatry.

indeed, the biblical Abraham is the source of a covenant through which a particular people is formed, there is something fundamentally unsuitable in this essential dimension of the figure of Abraham for interreligious purposes.

There is, however, one further element in the biblical image of Abraham that should be considered. In Genesis 12:2 we read that Abraham is to be a blessing to all people of the earth. There is something expansive in this notion of blessing that stands in contradistinction to the narrower focus of the Abrahamic covenant. How is this blessing to be understood? Two possibilities emerge. Let us examine two of the biblical commentators to Genesis 12. Abraham Ibn Ezra (12th c.), explains that all nations will be blessed on account of Abraham. According to this understanding, Abraham's merit extends to all of humanity. There is nothing humanity needs to do in order to express the blessing. Abraham provides the blessing for all of humanity. It is significant to note that blessing is not limited to a particular people and that all of humanity shares in Abraham's blessing. The understanding of merit as the basis of blessing allows for the most universal application of blessing, since the blessing is independent of the awareness or actions of the blessing's recipients. Rashi (11th c.), on the other hand, interprets the verse: "A person says to his son "be like Abraham".[4] According to this interpretation, the Abrahamic blessing involves awareness. One consciously blesses, using Abraham as a paradigm for blessing. Rashi does not tell us in what way one should be like Abraham. Presumably, Abraham's moral qualities are to be emulated.

The attempt to locate the exemplary quality of Abraham, that could serve as the basis for emulation, leads us to a common portrayal of Abraham as the archetypal man of faith. The view of Abraham as the paradigmatic man of faith is particularly developed in post-biblical literature, as expressed in the literature of the second temple and in its later repercussions. Second temple literature, unlike the biblical text itself, locates Abraham in the context of a battle for the knowledge of the true God against the falsehood of idolatry. Significantly, covenantal thinking, which constitutes the hallmark of biblical thought and shapes the biblical image of Abraham, declines in the literature of the second temple. At the same time, the image of Abraham serves a new and contemporary agenda: that of the battle against idolatry.

When does this process begin? In his recent study of the book of creation, *Sefer Yetzira*, dating back to the first centuries of the common era, Yehuda Liebes (2000: 85ff.) proposes that the first record of the image of Abraham

[4] The same two opinions are also reflected in Nachmanides' commentary (13th c.) on the earlier verse: "And you shall be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2).

the fighter against idolatry should be traced back to the pagan hellenistic philosopher Hecataeus of Abdera (4th c. BCE). According to Liebes, this image of Abraham emerges in the wake of Alexander's conquest of the holy land. Interestingly, it is first adopted by pagan philosophers, who use the image of Abraham as part of their polemic against idolatry. Be that as it may, it is clear that the contemporary need to fight idolatry informs the Jewish presentation of Abraham as a fighter against idolatry. A developed notion of this is to be found in the book of Jubilees, an apocryphal work of the 3rd or 2nd century BCE (Nickelsburg 1958: 152f.). The image of Abraham as fighter against idolatry also finds expression in the works of Josephus and Philo as well as in the midrash.

A final point of interest that is relevant to the project of this paper relates to the question of the precise process that Abraham undergoes. Does Abraham simply seek God through his own reason or does he come to know God through a process of revelation, in which God makes Himself known to Abraham? Different versions of Abraham's tale present both options. A midrashic version teaches that "Abraham our father said, 'It is inconceivable that the world is without a guide'. The Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, 'I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the Universe'"(*Gen. Rabba* 39:1). Abraham's path begins with query and quest. He reaches his answer through God revealing Himself as the owner of the house, the maker of the world.

A different presentation of Abraham's process is offered in the medieval retelling of the great Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides (12 c.). In his laws of idolatry, Maimonides offers a history of idolatry, in which the rediscovery of the true God is attributed to Abraham.

> After Abraham was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: "How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself." He had not teacher, no one to instruct him in ought .... His father and mother and the entire population worshiped idols, and he worshiped with them. But his mind was busily working and reflecting until he had attained the way of truth, apprehended the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, that He guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and that among all that exist, there is no god besides Him .... Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator. (Laws of Idolatry 1,3)

Maimonides proceeds to describe Abraham's fights with idolaters, breaking the images of idols and engaging in metaphysical arguments. Abraham is then portrayed as a teacher, gathering students around him and composing books, in which the true teaching concerning God is spread. It is significant that the entire process takes place purely through Abraham's own specula-

tion. Abraham is cast in the image of the perfect philosopher, who attains the truth through his speculation. Abraham spends nearly forty years in a process that leads him to the knowledge of God.

Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres (known by his acronym, the Rabad, 12th c.) wrote critical glosses to Maimonides' Code of Jewish law. In his gloss on Maimonides' description of Abraham's process, the Rabad introduces the rabbinic tradition that Abraham was three years old when he came to know God. The Rabad does not make explicit what point he wishes to make by introducing this rabbinic passage. One suggestion might be that he is countering the image of Abraham the philosopher, who seeks the knowledge of God until he attains it, with an anti-philosophical image of Abraham. If Abraham comes to know God at the age of three, this is only possible through divine revelation, when God makes Himself known to Abraham. A different image of God may be implied in this alternative way of telling the story. For the Rabad God may not be the God of the philosophical quest but a personal God who is known through a personal experience and who can be made known even to the three-year-old Abraham. The Rabad, through this gloss, may be expressing a sentiment that a later Frenchman, Blaise Pascal, expressed in his famous dictum, contrasting the God of Abraham with the God of the philosophers. The God of Abraham—indeed.

Before assessing the implications of the above materials for our discussion, I would like to point out that within Jewish tradition there exists a model that has served in the assessment of Christianity and Islam as religions. This model points back to Noah and to the seven noachide commandments, a basic moral code of universal significance, that includes the prohibition of idolatry. Traditionally, Christianity and Islam have been assessed as religions that conform to the noachide standards and are hence recognized as 'valid', from the perspective of Judaism's assessment of other religions, in terms of the seven noachide commandments (see Novak 1983). The noachide laws are something of a misnomer, inasmuch as, according to rabbinic tradition, they actually go back to God's original commandment to Adam and hence form part of a law governing creation from the outset (Bavli Sanhedrin 56b). Be that as it may, one common way in which Judaism has traditionally assessed other religions is in terms of a pre-Abrahamic religious code. The figure of Abraham, by contrast, traditionally serves Judaism as a symbol for converts. Abraham is not only the father of the Jewish nation. He is also the original and archetypal convert. All converts to Judaism, lacking physical Jewish parentage, are considered children of Abraham. Thus, a convert is always called

'so and so, son of Abraham'.[5] In light of these uses there is an obvious difficulty in applying the figure of Abraham to an interfaith context as a means of validating other world religions. There would be something contradictory in the same figure both enabling entry into Judaism and validating other religions outside Judaism.

Having offered these brief remarks concerning the image of Abraham in biblical and post-biblical Judaism, let us now consider the significance of these sources to an assessment of the relevance of the figure of Abraham to interreligious dialogue. There is an obvious difference between the relevance of biblical and post-biblical materials. Biblical sources, the foundational documents of Judaism, do not leave us much room for developing the image of Abraham as a symbol for interfaith rapprochement. The significance of the only relevant element we encountered in the biblical text, the notion of Abraham as a blessing for others, is limited. The notion is only relevant according to one particular construal of its meaning. But more significantly, Abraham is promised he will become a blessing to all people of the earth. Limiting the Abrahamic heritage to the so called 'Abrahamic' religions certainly does not accord with the wider trend of the universal Abrahamic blessing.

The post-biblical image of Abraham is clearly more suitable to the interreligious agenda. The image of Abraham the believer who discovers God, the monotheist who rejects idolatry, can obviously serve as a common point of reference for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A certain construction of Abraham as a monotheist might allow for Abraham to function as a common symbol for the three religions.[6] From a Jewish perspective, one might develop this dimension of the image of Abraham alongside the more exclusivist biblical elements, thereby creating a balance between the national and universalistic elements that have come to be associated with his person. There is, then, a particular sense in which one could agree to refer to Abraham as a common symbol for a central element that unites the faith of Judaism, Christianity and Islam:the belief in one God, the creator, and the concomitant rejection of idolatry.

Why is 'Abrahamic' Problematic from a Jewish Perspective?

Even if we agree to construct the person of Abraham in similar ways in the three religious traditions, such agreement may still be insufficient for a de-

[5] Paul's usage of the figure of Abraham seems to follow this convention. See Nickelsburg 1998: 168 ff.

[6] Note, however, that this image is not necessarily that of Abraham as the *first* monotheist. According to Maimonides, Abraham restores a lost monotheism rather than discovering this truth for the first time.

scription of the three religions as 'Abrahamic'. In order to appreciate this point, let us begin by setting forth the following critical question: Is the designation of the three religions as 'Abrahamic' a phenomenological description, belonging properly to the descriptive methods of the discipline of history-of-religions? I believe the answer is negative. There are many common elements in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These include their belief in revelation, Scripture, prophecy, reward and punishment, the afterlife, and more. There is no reason to single out Abraham as the characteristic category in light of which the three religions can best be described. While all three religions recognize the figure of Abraham, this is also true of their recognition of Moses as well as of numerous prophetic figures. The common recognition of Abraham is insignificant to a purely descriptive approach to the three religions.[7] Their respective appeals to Moses, Jesus and Mohammed are of far greater significance to their self identity than their common appeal to the person of Abraham. The description of all three religions as 'Abrahamic' emerges not out of purely descriptive concerns but from theological and ideological concerns that seek to establish a rapport between the three religions, through appeal to the common figure of Abraham.[8]

A look into the historical origins of the description of the three religions as 'Abrahamic' is helpful here. As far as I was able to detect, the earliest contemporary theological reference to the three religions in light of the figure of Abraham is found in the thought of Louis Massignon.[9] Massignon, himself a devout Catholic, picks up on Quranic notions of the centrality of the figure of Abraham as part of his deep existential quest for constructing bridges between Christianity and Islam. As Sydney Griffith has demonstrated in a superb essay, Massignon's credo is deeply rooted in his personal religious experience that owes much to Islam and particularly to Muslim mysticism. He is, as Griffith characterizes him, a true man of interfaith. Massignon's views

[7] Levenson (1998: 23) seems to assume that in some sense Abraham can be spoken of as the founder of all three religions. This would, of course, lend much more specific content to the designation of the three religions as 'Abrahamic'. However, the suggestion that all three religions regard Abraham as a founder seems forced. Levenson's own struggles with this issue, especially from a Jewish perspective (see p. 5 ff.) indicate how foreign the notion is to the sources.

[8] By way of contrast, one may compare the present ideological climate to that of an earlier age. Siker (1991) traces how Abraham came to be seen as the father of Christians alone to the exclusion of Jews. What distinguishes present from past ideological appeal to Abraham should not be only the ideological content (nice vs. nasty). Contemporary usage should be characterized by its hermeneutical and theological self-awareness. We may continue constructing a 'theologically correct' image of Abraham, provided we are aware of the causes that lead us to do so.

[9] My references to Massignon are based on Griffith 1997: 193-210.

of Islam were deeply influential on other thinkers, as well as on the formulations of the second Vatican Council's statements on Islam, which nonetheless did not wholeheartedly embrace Massignon's vision. A look at Massignon's statements, as well as those of others, leads us to a consideration of what might be meant by a description of the three religions as 'Abrahamic'. It is obvious that in order to characterize the religions as 'Abrahamic', something more must be intended than the simple common monotheistic belief they share. Two possibilities emerge in light of which we might consider what it is that makes the three religions 'Abrahamic' beyond their common monotheistic belief. Both possibilities are found in the works of Massignon. Both are far from self-evident from a Jewish perspective. The first is that we are all children of Abraham or, put differently, that we share a common story. The second is that we all believe in the God of Abraham. Let us examine both possibilities more closely.

The claim that we are all children of Abraham certainly grows initially on Christian soil. Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:6-4:11) teaches that Christians too share in the promises and blessings of Abraham. Christian faith links in an unmediated way with the faith of Abraham, thus making Christians heirs to the promises made to Abraham. Now, this claim stands at the heart of Judaism's difference with Christianity. Judaism's self-definition as a people bound by a covenant with God, the roots of which go back to Abraham, is at odds with a Christian understanding that Abraham is a figure whose spiritual heritage is available to all who are willing to confess the proper faith, even outside the boundaries of Israel and its covenant. Christianity could not be a 'New Israel' if this spiritual Abrahamic bypass did not exist. The classical Jewish position in relation to Christianity does not recognize the covenantal validity of Christianity.[10] To describe Christianity as 'Abrahamic' is thus implicitly to accept the Christian theological position. This is certainly more than simple description.[11]

The situation with Islam is also problematic. To describe Islam in terms of the children of Abraham necessitates making several assumptions. It assumes that, from a Jewish perspective, Yishma'el is indeed the father of the Arab people, a fact that is supported by the typological thinking of the Jewish

[10] Recently, some voices have opened up the question of Christianity's relationship to the Jewish covenant for discussion. I personally share with Yitz Greenberg the recognition that this question merits our theological attention.

[11] For an attempt to accommodate the Christian reading of Abraham on Jewish grounds, see Levenson 1998: 19. Levenson's argument indicates that he is consciously constructing the image of Abraham to meet a theological challenge. This is very different from the unexamined appeal to Abraham as common ground.

Middle Ages, regardless of what historical research may have to say on the matter. Still, even if Arabs are children of Abraham, does this make Islam as such a child of Abraham? From a Quranic perspective Islam or some of its key rituals may have been founded by Abraham. From a Jewish perspective that is not bound by the Quranic text, it is not so obvious that one would describe Islam as a child of Abraham. Once again, as in the case of Christianity, such a description accepts the insider's claims as factual, elevating them to the rank of a descriptive category. It should be pointed out that medieval typologies that view Christianity as Esau and Islam as Ishmael and thus implicitly acknowledge a common Abrahamic heritage do so in the context of the biblical story of exclusion in which only Jacob inherits the Abrahamic blessing. One cannot in a facile manner stand such typologies on their head, drawing from them the historical lesson that the three religions form a special related family of religions.

To consider Islam a child of Abraham is to draw upon another sense in which the three religions might be considered 'Abrahamic': they share a common story. Yet, do Judaism and Islam really share a common story, regarding the figure of Abraham? Both religions recognize the figure of Abraham, yet the story they tell is completely different. The biblical Abraham is the recipient of God's exclusive covenant with Israel. The Quranic Abraham visits Mecca on several occasions and together with his son Ishmael consecrates the Kaba. Can we really find here a common story? To claim that 'Abrahamic' might refer to a common story is to overlook the fundamental differences that distinguish the biblical and the Quranic texts and to concentrate only on their similarities. In this instance the similarity ultimately boils down to the presence of a common ancestral figure. To insist on a common story forces us to a superficial approach to our diverse scriptures. If interreligious dialogue resorts to such common denominators, it runs the risk of disregarding the real differences concerning which we truly need dialogue by highlighting only our commonalities.

Let us now look at the second sense that Massignon offers for common ground between the three religions: all three profess a faith in the same God, the God of Abraham. Now, it is obvious that as long as what is intended by this is reference to what, in less poetic terms, we call 'monotheism', this is a defensible position. It is, however, a very weak sense in which the three religions profess the God of Abraham, for it does not take us in any significant sense beyond the already recognized common denominator of monotheism. Could reference to the God of Abraham have an additional agreed-upon sense that could provide a meeting ground for the three religions? It seems to me that beyond the minimalist monotheistic sense, any attempt to describe the God of the three religions as the God of Abraham might do violence to their

individual uniqueness. For Massignon, the category 'God of Abraham' was a significant means of enabling his Christian co-religionists to find positive value in Islam. But once this becomes a descriptive term for the three religions, something fundamental in the nature of their respective understandings of God is lost. I think particularly of Christianity. Would it be true to the Christian doctrine of God to describe Him as the God of Abraham? While from a certain perspective this is certainly true, most of what is truly unique in the Christian teaching of the triune God would be lost, were we to adopt this understanding of Abrahamic faith. A similar point, though less obviously so, can be made with regard to Judaism. Unlike the post-biblical tradition that recognizes in Abraham the true teacher of faith in the one God, it is possible that the biblical tradition itself does not consider the revelation of God to Abraham as the highest and most complete self-disclosure of the God of Israel. Exodus 6:3 is a crucial passage in this context. It may teach us that a higher expression of God is made known to Moses, in contradistinction to the knowledge of God available to Abraham and the other Patriarchs. The teaching of God that is characteristic of Judaism, as expressed in the tetragrammaton, should accordingly be referred to as 'The God of Moses' rather than 'The God of Abraham'. In any event, one seems hard pressed to suggest what it is about the 'God of Abraham' that could actually provide a common ground for the three religions, beyond the basic monotheistic creed. From this perspective too the designation of the three religions as 'Abrahamic' seems unjustified.

A final word in this context: during the Middle Ages the three religions often met on the common ground of contemporary philosophy. To the extent that the God of religion is the God of philosophy or, to put it differently, that the God of Abraham is the God of the philosophic quest as portrayed by Maimonides, one would have an easier time considering the three religions as professing a common belief in the same God, discovered by Abraham through his quest, and in this sense - the God of Abraham. On the other hand, if the God of Abraham is known through His particular and unique revelation, appearing to Abraham as early as the age of three, we return to the question of whether one can consider the revelation of God in the three religions to be identical. As we move away from common philosophical ground, the continued appeal to the common 'God of Abraham' is made harder.

The upshot of these considerations is that there is little to commend the description of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as 'Abrahamic', from a Jewish perspective. In the previous part of this article I suggested that Abraham could be consciously construed in such a way as to provide a meeting ground for the three religions. Reference to Abraham the monotheist exists in all tra-

ditions. One might agree to overlook a wide range of applications of the figure of Abraham and to highlight, in the framework of interreligious dialogue, the image of Abraham that is common to the three religions. However, such agreement does not entitle us to classify the three religions as 'Abrahamic'. To construct Abraham along parallel lines is a conscious ideological move that participants in the interreligious dialogue may chose to make. They do so by highlighting parts of the tradition at the expense of others. By contrast, the description of the religions as 'Abrahamic' does not resort to any significant factual basis that could justify the description. To describe the three religions as 'Abrahamic' is not a simple ideological choice, similar to the choice of how one presents Abraham. Rather, it is a description that is both vacuous and distorting. To describe the three religions as 'Abrahamic' does not translate into any particular features or beliefs that unite the three religions beyond the already conceded belief in monotheism. The term suggests that something more is said concerning the three religions, when in fact it does not advance our understanding of either the uniqueness or the commonality of the three religions. More seriously, the continued use of 'Abrahamic' is liable to distort fundamental differences between the religions. The premises upon which 'Abrahamic' is based are the subject of deep controversies between the religions. To overlook these controversies and to highlight only the vaguest commonalities is to distort the traditions, even if such distortion serves an irenic purpose.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam
The Case for "Elective Monotheism"

The problem underlying the choice of the term 'Abrahamic Religions' is that of finding a shorthand form of referring to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, taking into account fundamental similarities between them as well as their history of coexistence, collaboration and competition. Any shorthand designation of the three religions should capture in a concise formula what is deemed essential as well as common to the three religions. The weakness of 'Abrahamic', in my view, is that rather than feature an essential element it elevates an unexceptional feature—the recognition of Abraham as a significant spiritual personality—to the rank of a defining feature of the three religions. Its strength is in the irenic suggestiveness of the term. Its weakness is that it is one-sidedly suggestive, buying into the theologies of some of the religions but not of all, rather than descriptive. A survey of the various attempts to designate Judaism, Christianity and Islam through some shorthand formula could be illuminating but is beyond the scope of the present reflection. I would, however, like to remind the reader of another designation that seems to have enjoyed greater currency until 'Abrahamic' came along. I