

for We inspired them to do good works, and to be constant in prayer, and to dispense charity: and Us alone did they worship.” (21:72-73) And Jacob’s son, Joseph, is also a prophet blessed by God.

The Quran reveres all the Prophets, named & unnamed, & as such, it is an amazingly **inclusive** religious text. It even insists on equality, stating that “**no distinction is to be made between them.**” However, some factual differences with other religious texts are paramount to Muslim theology, as the following example of ‘informed consent’ shows. The Bible informs us that Isaac had no idea what his father was intending, “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7). In the Quranic version, Abraham asked his son’s opinion, & Ishmael was fully aware and readily submitted to his father’s obligation. “**And when the child had become old enough to share in his father’s endeavours, the latter said: ‘O my dear son! I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you: consider, then, what would be your view!’ He answered: ‘O my father! Do as you are commanded: you will find me, if God so wills, among those who are patient in adversity!’**” (37:102) Without Ishmael’s consent, to the Muslim mind Abraham’s submission to God is tantamount to **human sacrifice**; with Ismail’s consent **it is a joint act of submission to God.**

Of course, God requires no such sacrifice, consensual or otherwise. Abraham could keep his beloved son and more, for God promises Abraham a nation – an ummah. Much is made of God’s promise. Abraham was indeed concerned for his children and his descendants. Firstly, & primordially, our responsibility to the world begins with our responsibility to our children. But perhaps also because he had a sense of history, and knew that what he wanted to achieve could not be done within one generation. God however tells him, “**My Covenant does not include the wrongdoers.**” (2:124) Thus, affirming through Abraham’s story that **it is deeds, not birthright** that ultimately matter.

Much also is made of the fact that according to the Bible God promises to Abraham a land. Thousands of years later, people are still fighting and killing one another because of those disputed claims. This should be an **uncomfortable reality** for anyone who claims to believe in **Abraham’s message of honest & upright conduct.** Can the children of Abraham actually coexist?

But Abraham does not have to be a divisive figure. Regardless of who claims him, or makes claims on his lineage, he is a role model for all. God says, “**I am going to make you a leader for all of mankind to follow.**” (2:124) It is the message of Abraham that is consistent in all the scriptures, & over which we can unite.

Abraham taught belief in the One God, and urged the leading of an upright life. Abraham’s story, primordial & archetypal, much of which is re-enacted annually through the Hajj, shows us the common, ancient origin of our human roots. Those roots have grown to become different trees, but each is a manifestation of the same reality, namely worship of the One Creator who created us all; who created us into diverse nations & identities so that we can constructively engage with one another, and compete in the doing of good.

Abraham expressed an archetypal spirituality which is in harmony with our natural inclination towards good. The Quran describes how Abraham was “**neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a hanif, a muslim. And he was not of the polytheists.**” (3:67) Not being a Jew or a Christian is undisputed from a historical perspective as he pre-dates both, but how could he be a “muslim” as he predates that too, does he not? This is where we have to understand that “**muslim**” is **not a noun** introduced from the time of Muhammad; rather it is **a way of being & thinking** that has existed since the beginning of creation. It describes the one who surrenders himself to God, and thus all the prophets were in that sense muslims, for they all surrendered to God. As for Abraham being a hanif – an upright, righteous person – the word has at its root in the way of Abraham, to incline towards good, to turn away from wrong. Thus, a person without any taught religion would come to the way of the hanif if they were to ponder the revelation of the created world.

Through Abraham’s progeny, we are united by familial ties: Jews & Muslims are often described as cousins. The story of Abraham reminds us of the deep connection of our kinship. We have a shared human experience, and remembering Abraham’s story gives us the opportunity to remember our original spiritual and moral substance. Remembering his covenant with God gives us the opportunity to remember our own original covenant. When we were souls with God, He asked us, “Am I not your Lord?” And our souls affirmed, “Yes, we do so testify.” (7:172). We all have the same essential experience of being human.

Abraham’s life was filled with struggle – breaking the idols, fighting with Nimrod, tolerating the fire, struggling with Satan, sacrificing his son, migration, homelessness, loneliness, torture, passage from the stage of prophecy to the stage of leadership, going from “individuality” to “collectivity” and being from “the house of ‘Azar” to being “the builder of the house of unity” (Kaaba)! If we stop complaining about our hardships, and follow the principles of Abraham – truth, morality, coexistence – then most of our problems will disappear.

O People of ALL faiths: Follow Abraham (peace)...

PARADISE FOUND!

The Paramount Symbol of **SACRIFICE** Abraham Father of Faith & Works

Abraham, as a prophet & patriarch, is called “**the friend of God**” in Jewish, Christian & Islamic scriptures. He has a place of eminence in the shared scriptures & histories of each of these three monotheistic, prophetic, & Middle Eastern religions. **Who could have a better religion than someone who submits himself completely to God, is a good-doer, and follows the religion of Abraham, a man of pure natural belief?** (Quran, 4:125) Abraham’s life was the exact opposite of idol worship. If he is to be relevant today, we have to ask what are the idols which we have crafted with our own hands, and which we take to be our gods. Indeed, **have we turned our religions into our idols?** For surely, it is not about whether we are Jew or Christian or Muslim, it is about whether we are **righteous, upright people**, and whether we are willing to surrender ourselves to God. We can **argue** about whom the covenant between God and Abraham is with, or we can fulfil our own covenant with God. We can **disagree** about whom God asked Abraham to sacrifice, or we can dedicate our own sacrifices to Him. We can **dispute** with each other about the nature of the tests Abraham faced, or we can face our own tests with fortitude, forbearance & patience. We can **fight** about our differences, or we can remember that we are united in the singular conviction that Abraham held – **there is only one God worthy of worship, and we surrender ourselves to Him.** Abraham’s Way has become “**Paradise Lost.**”

**Abraham said: 'Do you worship
instead of God that which cannot
profit you at all, nor harm you?
Shame on you & all that you worship
instead of God!
Have you then no sense?**

Abraham was constantly asked to place something precious on the altar. In the Midrash and the Quran, he is first asked to sacrifice idolatry. Since his father was a maker of idols, giving up “graven images” amounted to breaking with his family & his heritage. He surrenders his name in return for a promise. The next request of Abraham is that he give up his place, his home territory, allowing himself to be uprooted without being informed of the spot to which he will be transplanted. For much of his life, despite the covenant he made concerning his progeny, Abraham must sacrifice the pains & pleasures of fatherhood. Late in life, he surrenders logic, allowing himself to believe that his aged wife will give birth. Then, most famously, when given the gift of progeny at last, Abraham must place a son on the altar – the equivalent of tearing the heart from his breast and offering it as a sacrifice to his Lord.

In this contemplation of the ancient story of Abraham, we are reminded that Abraham did more than sacrifice. He sacrificed **willingly**, giving consent in an ecstasy that might remind us of that mythic embracer of life, James Joyce's Molly Bloom: “His heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will **Yes**.” There is the great assent that is at the heart of the Abrahamic religions and the Abrahamic virtues. Abraham's “Yes” echoes down the centuries. His descendants, like other squabbling siblings, sometimes deny their family resemblance and snarl at one another. However numerous their negations, the outer “No,” can never speak more loudly than the inward, fundamental, mystical, affirmative “Yes.”

To many, the three Abrahamic religions seem to be distinct, so sharply differentiated as to be almost by definition hostile. But Abraham is the patriarch of three faiths. Contemplating the “feminine” heart of this father – loving, forgiving, hospitable – teaches us that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have also one spiritual mother.

Responding to the call of the Infinite, Abraham uncovers the infinite within himself. Leaving the old self behind, he moves toward a “new” infinite Self. Thus Abraham's outer journey from “the land of Ur” mirrors his inner journey. A vital step on this inner journey, is the smashing of idols. Idolatry, in this context, is not merely the worship of “graven images” **but the blinding attachment to all literality, a rigid adherence to preconceptions that exclude love**. Midrash & Quranic tradition both include a story about the boy Abraham helping in his father's workshop, in which images of local gods were crafted. One day, Abraham smashes all the idols. “Why worship gods you create?” he says. “Worship the Source of all.” Only in a dissolution of fixed certainties can that still-unknown Source of all be found. Having said “**No**” to idolatry, Abraham says “**Yes**” to submission.

Abraham is characterized as God's intimate, one permeated in an affable reciprocity & mutuality of being & non-being, knowing & unknowing. Such a relationship, in the deepest sense, is a friendship. It is because of Abraham that “**hospitality became a sacred act**,” a welcoming that forms the basis for both faith and friendship.

The name of Abraham has become a byword for hospitable generosity. In any form, he welcomes the “other” without reserve or calculation. To every “other,” stranger or kinsman, Abraham offers his trust, his home, his possessions, and, ultimately, even life itself. Obviously, hospitality evinces itself in the legendary feast he provides for the three strangers who visits him. More subtle is the larger hospitality, the greatness of heart with which Abraham intercedes for others, even the sinners of Sodom, but also for the son of Hagar, Ishmael. Most dramatically, Abraham responds hospitably to God's commandments, even “entertaining” God's radical request that he sacrifice a son. Abraham is called upon to welcome the strange and the stranger and to see only holiness.

He defied his father and his community; he had to flee for his life; he abandoned his family in the wilderness; he was prepared to kill his son. With such a background, Abraham would not appear to be a good role model. Yet, he is revered by billions of people over thousands of years, and his life is a testament to pure monotheism, great sacrifices and devotion to God.

Abraham was born in a society steeped in the worship of idols. Early on in his life, he tried to persuade his father to reject this practice and submit himself to the One True God. But his father's business centred on crafting idols

of worship, and so he rebuked Abraham, “I shall most certainly cause thee to be stoned to death!” Abraham's reply is a perfect lesson in gentleness and politeness, “**Peace be upon you! I shall ask my Lord to forgive you: for, behold, He has always been kind to me.**” (19:46-47)

Idol-worship was seen by Abraham as something self-degrading and enslaving. He saw no greatness and experienced no awe in the worship of statues that his father and other human beings crafted with their own hands. So he tried to free his community from this harmful practice. In the Quranic narrative, he sets a testing scenario for the people by destroying all their idols except the largest one. When the people remonstrated with him, Abraham mockingly told them to ask the big idol for answers. The people were confounded, but only momentarily, and soon they demanded his death: “**Kill him... burn him.**” (29:24). But God saved him by cooling the flames.

By this point, the young Abraham had defied his father, enraged his community, and derided their beliefs. He had challenged the centres of power and upset the status quo with his persistent reasoning and logic. He even won the public debate with Nimrod, the king. By doing so, he became a dangerous dissident. Though he had won the intellectual arguments against his father, his community, and his king, he had been unable to win their hearts, and they threatened him with death. So Abraham was forced to flee with his wife Sarah and nephew Lot.

But his trials and tribulations were not over. Having committed his life to God, he was tested still further. He was commanded to leave his wife Hagar and son Ishmael in the wilderness, and later to sacrifice Ishmael. On the sacrifice, it is written in Genesis that, “Sometime later, God tested Abraham... ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac...Sacrifice him as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.’” (Genesis 22:1-2) In the Quran, however, it intimates that Ishmael is the one whom God had commanded for sacrifice. The argument about whether it was Isaac or Ishmael has become fundamental. For many people, religious belief is centred on this question. Leaving aside the dispute in identity, the fundamental lesson for us here is our willingness to give up that which is dearest and closest to us; whether we have the resolve and willpower necessary to achieve the higher spiritual goals.

The Quran praises Isaac & his son Jacob, calling them “righteous men”. It explains how God “**made them leaders who would guide in accordance with Our behest:**

**We preserved
Abraham's history for subsequent generations**

QURAN 37:108

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