

## INTRODUCTION:

### **Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi**

*Head of PASSIA, Jerusalem*

The legend of Abraham in religious history has been a controversial issue for many years. This fact was emphasized long ago in 1926, when the late Taha Hussein, the famous Egyptian intellectual and author of many studies on the prophets, accused those who were referring to the story of Abraham in different holy books of intending to build a connection between Jews and Arabs, since their holy books refer to the same story of Abraham with different interpretations.

In the early 1990s, the Western media started examining the common grounds or issues between Arabs and Jews, in particular the Abrahamic faith, and I remember quite clearly the answer given by an old Palestinian woman to a question posed to her by a foreign journalist: "What do you know about Abraham?" The woman replied, "I pray for him, I mention him in my five daily prayers when I ask God to bless Prophet Mohammed as God has blessed Prophet Abraham." But the woman then added that the Holy Qur'an taught her that Abraham was "neither Jew, nor Christian, but a believer in one God and a Moslem." When I tried to understand her words according to the current political dictionary of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, I heard her saying that Abraham is part of my faith, is mine, and – by adding the Qur'anic verses to stress her point – denying Abraham's affiliation with others.

What I heard was enough for me to ask a colleague of mine to write a paper on Abraham as a prophet and his descendents, family, marriage, relation to the land of Canaan, as well as the idea of monotheism in order to enrich the Palestinian library with a current study on the issue. PASSIA consequently published, in November 1991, a paper titled "Ibrahim in the Torah, Bible and the Qur'an" by Dr. Abdel Sattar Kassim of An-Najah University, followed by a second edition in July 1994.

My interest in the story of Abraham and where the people of the three books meet and differ on the issue did not, however, stop there. In 1996, Bishop Samir Kafeyti of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem invited me to meet Dr. Shimon Shetreet, the former Israeli Minister of Religious Affairs, who was carrying a huge basket of ideas and projects, starting with a joint prayer for peace and ending with an international religious conference in one of the Arab capitals. My opinion was that the interfaith dialogue should take place alongside the political negotiations, but that it should in no way be regarded as a substitute, and that we should refrain from beginning by politicizing religion. I believed then - as I believe today - that whereas the battle to reach a political settlement promised to be lengthy and difficult, the blessing of the religious people and their leaders for the idea of tolerance and coexistence would precede and even perhaps facilitate the reaching of this settlement.

The challenge we are facing is one whereby we need to read and see the 'other' as he wishes to be read and seen, and not the way we are accustomed to reading or seeing him. The blessing of the true believers from the three great monotheistic religions will, in my opinion, light the way to our overcoming the challenge and lead the negotiations to a just solution.

As part of our efforts to meet this challenge, the three of us agreed - the bishop, the former minister and myself – to hold one or two meetings on interfaith dialogue, during which Moslems, Christians and Jews would be invited to discuss their affiliation to Abraham. PASSIA held two meetings: the first on 15 December 1997, and the second on 15 October 1998, during which three papers covering the way in which Abraham is perceived by the authors according to the perspective of their respective religions were presented by Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway, Father Maroum Lahham, and Professor Avigdor Shinan.

As expected, the discussions in the two meetings reflected the absolute faith of the three speakers in the way in which their respective religions perceive Abraham. The participants were not trying to convince each other to accept what is written, understood, and interpreted in their holy books, nor did they attempt to compare names, places and facts; their only aim in making their presentations was to enable the other participants to formulate a better idea of what Abraham means to them as a Moslem,

Christian or Jew. As I observed at the beginning of the first meeting: in order to see and hear the 'other', one must first acknowledge his presence, even if one does not accept what he has to say, and because the dialogue that followed each presentation reflected personal positions only, not those of the institutions represented by the individuals involved, I found myself restricted, bound by the confidential nature of the dialogue, to publishing only the papers.

In spite of the numerous aspects of our political conflict, all of which require comprehensive solutions, I still believe that the best road the Palestinians can take on their way to freedom and independence is one that arrives at the venue of building the culture of justice and peace, which is the cornerstone of the three monotheistic religions. Therefore, the interfaith dialogue on freedom of religion and faith, as well as bringing people of the book to meet, talk and understand each other, is of great importance for all the Moslems, Jews and Christians of the region, especially here in Jerusalem.

*Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi*  
*Head of PASSIA*  
*Jerusalem,*  
*December 1998*