

**Professor Zeki Saritoprak's
Address to the 9th Abrahamic Conference
Mary MacKillop Place, 10th July 2011**

Prof Zeki Saritoprak has been the Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University since 2003. He holds a Ph.D. in Islamic Theology (The Science of Kalam) from the University of Marmara, Turkey. He earned his Master's degree in Islamic Theology and Philosophy, and his B.A. in Divinity from the same university. He studied Arabic language for several years in Cairo while researching for his dissertation in Islamic Theology, entitled The Antichrist (al-Dajjal). He is the Founder and former President of the Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue in Washington, D.C. He researched and taught courses at Harran University (Turkey), Georgetown University, the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. and Berry College in Rome, Georgia. Some of the subjects he has taught include Islamic Theology, Introduction to Islam, World Religions, Biblical Elements in the Qur'an, Islamic Spirituality, classical and contemporary Islamic movements, and interfaith dialogue as well as courses on Islamic personalities such as al-Ghazzali and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. In addition to presenting at numerous conferences and universities over the years, Dr. Saritoprak is also the author of several books and academic articles in Turkish, English, and Arabic.

Professor Zeki Saritoprak opened his address with an anecdote about Abraham, acknowledging firstly it is Abraham who has brought us together today.

In the Islamic tradition, Abraham is known for his hospitality and friendship. It is believed that he would have a guest every night for dinner. One day he could not find anybody so he went out searching for someone to find a person, who according to tradition, was very old. During his conversation with this stranger before dinner, he found out his guest was not a believer in God. Because of this Abraham did not want to share his food with someone who did not believe. So he said, "Please excuse me, but go out. I do not want to share my food with you! And his guest left the house. According to the story God immediately sent the angel Gabriel to Abraham (in Islam it is the Angel Gabriel who brings revelation to the prophets). Gabriel said to Abraham, "Abraham, God sends His greetings to you." And saying that God said, "I have been feeding this person for eighty years and you could not feed him for one night!" So after hearing the message from God, Abraham went out and tried to find his guest. Eventually he found him and brought him to his house and said to his guest, "God criticized me for my actions; I apologize for this" and he started to have his dinner with this old man.

This is a story, not in the Quran, but it comes from some Islamic sources, especially the commentaries on the Quran with regard to hospitality. Abraham is known as the Father of Faith who brought the understanding of one God to humanity. In fact, the Quran describes Abraham as a pure and a muslim. The word "Muslim" has two connotations in the contemporary Islamic theological discourse. Muslims with a capital "M" are those that follow the teachings of Islam brought by the Prophet Muhammad. And muslims with a lower-case "m" can be used for anyone who submits himself to the will of God. Therefore anyone who submits himself to the will of God, be it male or female is a muslim.

So based on this understanding Abraham was a muslim, Moses was a muslim, Jesus was a muslim, as were the apostles of Jesus. This is very clear in the Quran. As Fr. Daniel Madigan referred to Jesus' statement, "'If you were Abraham's children,' said Jesus, 'then you would do the things Abraham did'" (John 8:39).

The Quran speaks of Muslim's practice of following Abraham in a detailed way. One of the distinctive characteristics of Abraham in the Quran is his unequivocal belief in the "Oneness" of God. According to the Quranic story, the people of Abraham were idol worshippers. And on one occasion, when people wanted to go out for a festival, Abraham made an excuse not to go with them. As Rabbi Jacobson mentioned in his talk, when he commented on Fr. Madigan's speech, he said that there was a place called "the House of Idols." Abraham was against this "House of Idols" and wanted to make a case for the oneness of God. So, when they went to the festival, Abraham went to the "House of Idols" and smashed all of them with an axe and then hung the axe on the neck of the biggest idol, but he didn't destroy the biggest idol.

When people came back from the festival and went to the house of idols, they realized that all the idols except one were smashed. They started questioning, "Who could have done this?" And some pointed at Abraham, saying, "Well, we hear Abraham has been talking negatively about these idols. Could he have done this?" They subsequently brought Abraham in for questioning to which Abraham responded, "No, the biggest idol did it because the axe is hung around its neck." They made a counter argument saying, "The biggest idol was a stone and was unable to smash the idols."

But this was the crux of Abraham's argument. Abraham reasoned that if this stone could not do it, then how can this stone (idol) be worshipped? How can his people consider this idol as their creator? And then Abraham said, "I did it! Because these idols cannot be God. They are just stones. Your Creator is God, who is the Creator of the heavens and the Earth." Then the public decision was made that Abraham was to be thrown into the fire to be burned to death. They prepared a huge pile of wood, started a fire and threw Abraham into the fire. But according to the Quranic verse God spoke to the fire and said, "Be cool and peaceful upon Abraham." Therefore the fire could not burn Abraham.

Muslim mystics have spoken about this event with regard to Abraham's utmost level of trust in God. They mention a story which is also mentioned in the commentaries of the Quran. When Abraham was thrown into the fire, the Angel Gabriel came to him and said, "God commands me to do whatever is necessary, just ask me for help." Abraham replied "No! God knows my condition; I do not ask anyone for help except Him." According to mystics, that was evidence of the utmost trust of Abraham in God because he would not even ask Gabriel for help.

So the story of the oneness of God and Abraham's struggle for it is detailed in various chapters of the Quran, and on various occasions the Quran presents him as the one who presented the idea of the oneness of God. The term "the oneness of God" (tawhid) has some connection to Abraham and in fact some commentators believe that the term comes from the era of Abraham. As Fr. Daniel Madigan mentioned, this is one of the terms that is used in the Hanif tradition. This Hanif tradition which emphasizes inclusiveness is mentioned in the Quran in the following verse, "Lo! those people who are most worthy of Abraham are those who followed him, and this prophet and those who believe; and God is the guardian of the believers,"(Q 3:68) understand the word "believers" in a

more inclusive way to include *all* of those who believe in one God. In fact, the word Hanif itself means “the pure.” Again, the connection of Prophet Muhammad to Abraham is the Prophet’s practicing the religion of Hanif prior to the revelation of the Quran. There is a question about the Prophet Muhammad’s religious practices before he received the revelation of the Quran: Which religion was he following when he was going to the cave called “Hira” for meditation? According to Muslim theologians, he was following the religion of Hanif. There were few Hanif people in Mecca and Prophet Muhammad was following the religion of Abraham. The Prophet Muhammad said, “I am the prayer of my father Abraham.” In other words, the Prophet meant that he was the result of the prayer of his grandfather Abraham. As the Quran narrates, he prayed to God and said, “Our Lord, send them a messenger from their own to read for them your verses and teach them the book and wisdom and to purify them. You are the most majestic and the most wise” (Q 2:129).

When Fr. Madigan mentioned the concept the connection of the land for Abraham, which was Canaan, it reminded me of the Quranic approach that Abrahams’ land was Mecca. In one of the Quranic verses Abraham describes this place. The verse narrates the prayer of Abraham:

“Our Lord, I have put my offspring in a valley that has no agriculture close to your Sacred House, (The Ka’bah) our Lord, so that they will perform prayer and you incline the hearts of people towards them and bestow upon them your sustenance of fruits so that they become thankful to you” (Q 14:37).

Even further, Abraham speaks of a city, which Muslim commentators interpret to be Mecca, “My Lord, make this city safe and protect me and my children from worshipping the idols” (Q 14:35).

In fact, even today when people go on pilgrimage, they see how this place is desolate despite the efforts of the Saudi government, but no one cares about the desolation. Millions of people still travel to this place every year for pilgrimage because the hearts of people are inclined towards that place which means the prayer of Abraham was accepted. According to the Quranic teaching, Prophet Muhammad’s coming to this nation was a sign of acceptance of the prayer of Abraham. This is evident as the prophet said, “I am the result of the prayer of my grandfather Abraham.” The Prophet Muhammad was a messenger from the people of Arabia, sent to them, taught them the Quranic verses, the book and wisdom.

In the Islamic tradition Abraham is also a symbol of prayer. The Quran narrates many of his prayers. Muslims are taking their prayers from Abraham as taught by the Quran. For example, when Fr. Madigan mentioned Ishmael being the intended sacrificial son, it reminded me of Abraham’s conversation with Ishmael and how Ishmael was submissive to his father’s request and how he, like Abraham, was constantly praying to God. Although Ishmael was the intended sacrificial son, Muslims have considered Isaac a messenger of God as well. So there is not distinction between Ishmael and Isaac in Islam. Still commentaries of the Quran mention that it is possible the son to be sacrificed was Isaac, but the consensus of Muslims generally throughout Islamic History, believe that it was Ishmael and the reason for this is due to a grammatical principle in the Quran. When a pronoun refers to a noun in the sentence, it goes to the closest noun. Now in the chapters that Fr. Madigan referred to, the verse in question has a pronoun which goes to the closest noun which is Ishmael in this case. And that is the major reason when commentators of the Quran refer to Ishmael as the sacrificial son. In fact from the Quranic point of view, the name is not so important. The important idea is the submission of both Abraham and the son to the will of God. So when Abraham asked his son about the command of God, his son submitted himself to the will

of God and said, "Father if this is God's command, do it. I will be submissive."

Another point I would like to make here is related to the Islamic theology of dreams. Theologically speaking, dreams cannot be criteria for making a decision, especially when it comes to religious issues. Dreams that prophets of God have are considered a part of the revelation of God, but not the dreams that other people have, even the saints. For example, when somebody has a dream to sacrifice his son and then tries to do it, it would be against the teaching of Islam because Abraham was a unique case, a messenger of God and his dreams were parts of divine revelation.

Abraham is one of the elite prophets in Islamic teaching. In the Islam theology of prophethood, there are 124,000 prophets, 5 of whom are the highest. These are namely Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed. These five are considered to be great prophets so they are not like regular prophets. The dream of sacrificing his son was a test for Abraham.

I really liked Fr. Madigan's statement when he said, "Pilgrimage is the way of life." I found it very Islamic. In the Islamic teaching, when Muslims are going on pilgrimage, they have to think that pilgrimage is preparing them for the realm of eternity, and when they are back from the pilgrimage, they come back as a new person--a new born Muslim.

Another aspect of Abraham that Fr. Madigan mentioned showed Abraham as a model stranger. This reminded me of the Prophet Muhammad's famous saying that "My story is like a traveller who rests under the shade of a tree for a while and then goes towards his/her destination." In the Islamic teaching this world is short bit of time compared to the afterlife which is ahead and the final destination. People stay in this world as much as an individual who rests in the shade of a tree as the Prophet said in his analogy.

Standing for Justice is again one of the divine names in Islam. The divine name al-Adil is the one who always makes justice. When Fr. Madigan mentioned that Abraham challenged God it seemed to be incompatible with the teaching of Islam. In the Islamic teaching, no one can challenge God, including Abraham. Abraham was addressing God and making sure that he was on the right path. It has been a hesitation in Islam to use the word "challenge" with regard to how we address God. In the Quran, when Abraham asked God about God's ability to resurrect people, God responds, "Abraham don't you believe?" Abraham replies, "I believe, but I want to be satisfied." So he was asking not in a challenging way, but so he could be totally convinced.

I will finish with this question: What can we learn from Abraham today? I would say, it is the spiritual strength that Abraham had, and I think if we are spiritual, and we practice that aspect of Abraham, we will be able to share with our neighbors regardless of their religion, regardless of their ethnicity. We will also be able to share with our fellow human beings regardless of anything. And I think, as a result we will be able to make our planet as a credible brotherhood.

*Transcribed from an audio recording by Bedelia Melville
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