Where to now? Ways forward for interreligious dialogue:  
Images of Abraham as models of interreligious encounter  

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When in 1965, the Catholic Church, in its Second Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate*, began its brief but groundbreaking treatment on Muslims with the words “The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims,” I think that the reaction of Catholics around the world was generally, “We do?” First of all, Christians didn’t know much about the religion of Islam and very few of us had any direct personal contact with Muslims. Secondly, we didn’t know that it was permitted for us to have esteem for the followers of another religion, much less that we should, as part of our faith, have such esteem. Yet “esteem for Muslims (NA 3),” the awareness of a “common spiritual patrimony with Jews (NA 4),” and a “sincere reverence for the conduct, life, precepts and teachings (NA 2)” of Hindus, Buddhists, and others is part of our Christian faith as that has been declared by the highest teaching authority in the Catholic Church, an ecumenical council.

I am not exaggerating when I say that this text changed my life. In 1969, only four years after the *Nostra Aetate* document was promulgated, I was a young priest teaching English at a teachers’ college in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. My provincial told me that I would be sent on for further study, but that it was not yet decided what field I should pursue. He told me to get advice from people in the diocese and in my Jesuit province and others, to see what the needs were and how I might make a contribution. Some of my Muslim students suggested that I study Islam; in that way, they said, I could help Christians learn more about the religion of Islam and also help Muslims to come to know better the religion of Christians. I went back to my room and pulled out a copy of the documents of the Second Vatican Council and turned to *Nostra Aetate*. “The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims,” I read. I realized then that my mission would be first to discover the reasons for the esteem we should have for Muslims and secondly, as a teacher, to communicate those reasons to others.

So this is how I have spent most of my adult life; about half the time I teach Islamic studies in Christian institutions and half the time Christian studies in Islamic institutions. I spent 13 years in charge of the Vatican office for relations with Muslims, and an equal number of years promoting dialogue in the Society of Jesus at the Jesuit Curia in Rome. Today I live in Ankara, Turkey, where I divide my time almost equally between Christians and Muslims.
Much has changed in the world in the forty years that have passed since I took up that apostolate. In geopolitical terms, what has not changed is more surprising than the changes that have occurred: there are still two Chinese governments, Korea is still divided, and the relations between Israel and Palestine are still unresolved. In terms of technology, I remember back in the early 80s in the Vatican that the computer was described as “one of these toys that Americans like to play with,” now our pre-schoolers learn to use them. Internet, cellphones, and Skype have changed the way we communicate with one another.

In interreligious relations, also, much has changed. When Pope John Paul II called the first day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986, not only were many Christians shocked at the idea of praying with people of other faiths, but many of the Jews, Muslims, Hindus and others that we invited were suspicious that this was some new ploy to recruit converts. In the end, we wound up with a good number of Buddhists and Bahais, a small number of Jews, a handful of not very representative Muslims, and only a couple Hindus. However, by the time of the second and third days of prayer in Assisi, relations were changing rapidly so that by 2002, there were so many Muslims, Jews, and Christians of various Churches who wanted to take part that the number had to be strictly limited. Many of those who wanted to speak were disappointed, as there simply wasn’t place and time for all the important and representative people who wanted to take part.

And this brings us to our topic this evening, “where to now?” As our world continues to evolve, so also do the relations among religious groups. There are new emphases and new directions in which we need to move. I will mention seven priorities for interreligious relations in coming years and I want to root these concerns in the common tradition of Abrahamic monotheism, where many of us here find our spiritual home. Because the figure of Abraham still provides the themes we need to consider in interreligious encounter, I will introduce my points with “snapshots” from the story of Abraham, Ibrahim, the friend of God.

1. A common mission for believers

In the Biblical Book of Genesis, the story of Abraham begins abruptly (Gen 12:1) with a look of surprise on Abraham’s face as God commands him: “Leave your country and your people and go to the land I will show you.” God is uprooting Abraham, sending him away from everything he knows, snatching him out of his comfortable nest, his community, his customary ways of doing things, and the beliefs of his father’s house, and leading him to new challenges, a new language, culture, and way of living, new friendships and alliances.
This image symbolizes the challenge of interreligious dialogue in coming years, which could be called the pilgrimage of the 21st Century. The time is past when we could each remain comfortably in our own spiritual homeland while we pick up second-hand facts and insights about other religions. When we personally meet persons of other faiths and come to know them, live and work with them, we are called to move out of our stereotypes and generalities and must admit that we have a lot to learn. Acknowledging that we don’t have all the answers is a painful experience, just as the realization that we cannot solve all the problems ourselves is a humbling recognition.

To meet the problems of our world today means working together and learning from one another. That’s why the concept of a “dialogue of civilizations” makes so much sense. But beyond this, as people of faith we have a common mission in this world, which is another unfamiliar concept with which we must work. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council intuited this common mission when they declared, in reference to Christian-Muslim relations, that “even though in the course of centuries not a few hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to move beyond the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to promote together for the benefit of all, social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom (NA 3).” Notice that in four key areas of modern life these two faith communities, that together comprise over half the world’s population, are called to cooperate: for justice, for moral values, for peace, and for true human freedom.

So dialogue is a new terrain on which we must live our respective religious commitments. Like our father Abraham, we have to trust that God is leading us into this new field of action. We are the heirs of God’s words to Abraham: “I will make you a great nation (Gen 12:2).” We have the responsibility of greatness thrust upon us, that of letting the world see that we can live and work together, that religion need not be a source of conflict and war, but again as God said to Abraham, “All nations will be blessed through you.” Together we are called to be, as the Qur’an says, “rahmat lil-‘alamin, a blessing to the universe (Qur’an 21:107).”

2. Hospitality and the world’s refugees

A second image of Abraham that we have is his knife held aloft, ready to slaughter his fattest calf to feed the three visitors, in a tale of hospitality that is recounted in both the Bible and the Qur’an. In all three traditions, Abraham is held up as the model of the good host. What kind of host was Ibrahim? The Qur’an describes him as “gentle, compassionate, and often turning to God” (Qur’an 11:75). This image is one that we all need to take seriously today,
living as we do in a world with 11.5 million international refugees and another 25 million internally displaced persons.

The experience of being forced to leave one’s home because of poverty, threats, or fear of violence is one that most of us have fortunately not experienced, but it occurs so frequently in the lives of the principal characters of the Bible and the Qur’an that it is clear that this experience is basic in God’s message to humanity. Abraham forced to leave his father’s house, Moses and his people fleeing Egypt in the middle of the night, the baby Jesus carried off to Egypt by his parents a step ahead of Herod’s soldiers, Muhammad’s early disciples taking refuge in Ethiopia, and the prophet Muhammad’s own hijra to Madina – these dramatic stories show the centrality of the refugee experience for God’s word.

Today, many centuries later, so many of our policy disputes still concern the best way to respond to refugee issues. There is no doubt that one of the main themes of interreligious relations in coming years will have to do with migrants and refugees. Our religious communities each have their own agencies to provide assistance to people on the move, but this is an area where interreligious cooperation must be increased. Cooperation must include not only cooperating on matters of aid and emergency relief, but even more helping our governments devise humane and generous policies in regard to refugees and asylum seekers.

The Qur’an description of Abraham’s hospitable nature, “Gentle, compassionate, and often turning to God,” points out the values on which our own approach to immigrants and people in crisis must take. Finally, the cooperation of our religious communities in favor of those forced to abandon their homes because of violence and misery must take on a preventive aspect, that of opposing in God’s name the structures and strategies of violence that uproot people and cause them to flee intolerable conditions. It is no accident that in 2008 almost half the refugees under the care of UNHCR are either from Afghanistan or Iraq.

3. Friendship and mutual blessing

Let us turn to another image of Abraham. This time he is sitting cross-legged on a camel hide with Melkizedek, the king of Salem (Genesis 14: 8). In what must be one of the earliest recorded interreligious encounters in history, the two men pledge themselves to be a blessing for one another and seal their friendship pact with a meal. It is not straining the point here to see this emphasis on building friendship and blessing as a paradigm for interreligious relations in coming years. I believe that this has been one of the most effective intuitions of
the movement inspired by Fethullah Gülen, in whose honor the Islamic chair at the Australia Catholic University is named. In the past decade this community has set up, at great expense of manpower and funding, a network of dialogue centers around the world. In my home country of the United States alone, these centers and institutes surpass two hundred. We can hope that this tactic to promote dialogue and mutual blessing among people of diverse religious backgrounds and convictions will encourage other religious groups to find creative and effective ways to overcome the barriers of mistrust and suspicion.

4. Peacemaking and generosity

The next image of Abraham has him dismantling his tents (Genesis 13: 18) in preparation to move them to the opposite end of the Jordan valley. Abraham’s shepherds and those of Lot had been quarreling over pastures and water holes, so the two met to settle their property dispute through negotiation and compromise. In the Bible, Abraham is portrayed as a man of peace who was unwilling to raise his arm against his brother. He even gave Lot first choice of land and took what remained for himself. The peacemaking efforts of our present-day religious communities will have to reflect these attitudes of Abraham. What positive contributions are our religious communities making towards a just and secure resolution of today’s conflicts? Can the same generous God-centered orientations that guided Abraham be those that our religious adherents will bring to the negotiating table today?

5. Believers must tell their stories of faith

Our next image is from the Islamic tradition and is also found in Jewish midrash. Abraham is standing resolutely with his back to the edge of a cliff, as soldiers are about to throw him off. He has infuriated Nimrod, the ruler, by rejecting the national deities. Nimrod has prepared what the Jewish sources describe as “the world’s largest bonfire.” Abraham is hurled from the cliff but before he reaches the ground, the fire turns into a lake full of fish and Abraham is saved. The cliff and fish-filled lake are until today sites of veneration and pilgrimage in the city of Urfa, in Turkey, a strong candidate for the honor of being Abraham’s birthplace.

What is happening in this legend? Abraham is ready, but for the intervention of God, to die in witness to his faith in God against all the threats delivered by Nimrod. Here too we can find a direction for our interreligious encounters in coming years. One of the most basic beliefs that religious adherents hold in common is that the material world that we can see and
touch is not the whole of reality and is perhaps not even the most true and enduring aspect of life. There is a deeper reality of which our material world is merely a pale reflection.

The common witnessing to something deeper, richer, is what gives cooperative ventures such as the Parliament of World Religions their raison d’être. The Parliament is not simply folklore with music, costumes, processions, and performances. Nor is it simply an academic conference, although it contains elements of both of these. The Parliament, including the 2009 Parliament that will be held here in Australia in a few months time, is an opportunity for the followers of all religions to tell their stories, and they have many different ways to tell their very different stories. In all this, there is a common thread: “What you see is not nearly all you get.” Faith in God takes us into spiritual realms where appearances are deceptive and descriptions are by their nature inadequate.

I believe that in coming years, the various religious communities will agree in recognizing the need to find compelling ways to show that the secularization process of recent centuries, which in recent decades has reached even the most isolated corners of our world, has not spelled the end of religion nor succeeded in persuading people of the irrelevance of God. Moreover, if we who are religious adherents hope to make a significant contribution to the values by which our societies are guided, we have to find ways to cooperate in order to put an end to the myth that religion is the main cause of conflict in the world.

6. The God who sees the plight of women

My next image is a heartrending picture of the slavegirl Hagar, or Hajar, alone in the desert with her baby Ismail, deserted by all but being comforted by God. We all know the story, how Abraham and Sarah could not have children, so Sarah gave permission to Abraham to have relations with the household servant. However, when Hagar conceived and bore a son, Sarah became jealous and insisted that Hagar be sent away.

The Bible has two versions of this story, and both are instructive. In the first (Genesis 16: 7-15), God comes to comfort Hagar in the guise of an angel. Hagar recognizes the divine Lord in the visitor and gives God a new name. God is Ha-Ro’y, that is, “the One who sees.” The divine visitor tells her four things: 1) he gives her sound advice, go back and reconcile with Sarah. 2) the angel consoles her; she will not die in the desert but be the mother of countless descendants. 3) The angel responds to the eternal concern of every pregnant woman, yes, her child will be born safely. 4) Her son Ismail will be a fearless and powerful man.
In the second story (Genesis 21: 14-21), when Hagar and the child are on the point of dying of thirst in the desert, God sends the angel to tell her that she and her child will not die in the desert, but that Ismail will be the father of a great nation and that God will be with him. The angel then leads her and the child to a well where they could drink and live. The Islamic tradition continues the narrative, stating that Abraham, who had been searching everywhere for Hagar, found her and the child by the well, and built a house for them. Later Abraham with the help of the young Ismail, built a great house for the worship of God, which Muslims believe to be the first building on earth dedicated to the worship of the one God.

It is to the credit of the Islamic tradition that it has elevated the faithful slavegirl to become “Our Lady Hajar,” and that her struggle for life is commemorated by the hajj pilgrims in their running between Safa and Marwa, and that God’s saving intervention is recalled in the still-flowing well of Zamzam and in the pilgrims’ visits to the house of Abraham. Moreover, the Biblical tradition, sacred to Jews and Christians, contains much insight that could be fruitfully mined for our reflection. Hagar (who could perhaps be called the first mystic of the Bible) names God “the One who sees.” What does God see? God sees the plight of this poor, low-born, mistreated, desperate suffering woman and God shows compassion for her.

I have met the modern sisters of Hagar many times in the course of my work and travels. Let me give an example. If you are ever in Hong Kong at midday on Sunday and go to the Star Ferry island terminal, you will see an amazing sight. Every sidewalk and parking lot near the ferry will be filled with Filipina domestics getting together on their day off. These women are sharing food they prepared at home and, more importantly, sharing news from home and about the Filipino community in Hong Kong: whose mother is sick, who’s hiring, who just had a baby, who needs a collection taken up because she has to have surgery. They have formed a self-sustaining community life despite severe limitations of time and economy.

But this is only half the story. Take the Star Ferry to the Kowloon side and you will find a similar scene, except that instead of Christian Filipinos, you will find the park area near the ferry filled with Muslim Indonesians. It would be hard not to admire these courageous, hard-working women, far from home, often supporting their children and aged parents, subject, like their ancestor Hagar, both to the whims and good will of their employers. And as in the story of Hagar, “the God who sees” observes their plight and takes their part.

This image underlines an important direction of interreligious encounter in our days. This is the dialogue among women of different religions. It is a dialogue that was not very apparent
in the first decades of the interreligious movement, probably because most encounters were organized by men, in ways that men feel comfortable doing, but with which women might feel out of place, and on topics of interest to men but perhaps of less interest to women.

In coming years there is a need to our religious institutions and communities to devote greater resources to intensify friendship and cooperation among women of various religions and to provide opportunities for women believers to converse. The point is not solely to give due attention to those situations in which women are oppressed and victims of discrimination, but to create fora to bring forward women’s points of view on topics of interest to society and, most of all, to provide opportunities for participants to explore more deeply women’s unique experience of spirituality, God, faith, and the meaning of life. We must all recognize the importance of this dialogue priority and those religious communities that have begun to promote such encounters are to be commended.

7. Reconciliation and moving beyond the burdens of the past

The final image that I want to offer is that of Abraham, dead and wrapped in a shroud. The scene that commands our attention is that of Ismail and Isaac, reconciled at last, together laying their father to rest in Machpelah near Hebron (Genesis 25: 9). With this we come to one of the most intractable of human problems, and the one where perhaps religious groups can make their most powerful contribution to human society. This is the question of reconciliation and forgiveness.

When all is said and done, the biggest obstacle to interreligious harmony is not the “issue of the moment” but the burden of history that we all carry with us. Every religious community, every ethnic and linguistic group, can make a long list of the times and ways that they were mistreated by members of some other group. On the one hand, people’s memories of wrongdoing and oppression are very long and events that happened a hundred or even thousand years ago can still color the way that people regard one another; on the other hand, recent experiences of violence and cruelty are like fresh wounds, and like physical wounds are apt to fester and infect the whole body.

Does this mean that we are all prisoners of the past, condemned to keep on repeating the same accusations and counter-charges and perpetuating the same cycle of resentment and reprisal? How can people move beyond the wrongs of the past to find the freedom to relate
to one another in beneficial and productive ways? Here the religions can make a unique contribution by teaching emphatically the forgiveness that is rooted in all our Scriptures.

The late Pope John Paul II once made a very wise comment. He said that true peace is founded on two pillars: justice and forgiveness. Both are necessary, one without the other will not succeed in making real peace. Speaking about forgiveness where issues of justice are not faced and resolved will fall on deaf ears; no one is willing to forgive if he feels he is still being treated unjustly. On the other hand, correcting injustices is by itself insufficient to create peace because the anger, resentment, and very human craving for revenge will still be operative. For real peace we need both, and this is where the religions, each of which commands justice and urges forgiveness, can make a real difference in the world’s progress.

Interreligious cooperation in the area of peacemaking and reconciliation will undoubtedly be a key priority for interreligious relations in coming years. Moving in this direction, the Asian Muslim Action Network and the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences have been cooperating for almost a decade on peace studies courses aimed at building up, in every Asian country, a interreligious collection of “peace activists” who can be called upon in situations of local tension and conflict. Trained in the techniques of conflict analysis and transformation, as well as in the teaching of the various religions on the obligation to work for forgiveness and reconciliation, these highly-motivated activists are provided with the capability to become, in turn, local peace educators. If time permitted, I could give numerous other examples of those in various religious communities in diverse parts of the world who are working actively both to overcome the physical, spiritual, and emotional damage caused by violent conflict and to prevent, as far as it is within human power, the attitudes and conditions that lead to future outbreaks of violence.

Most of all, our religious convictions provide us with a powerful tool: hope. In all our peacemaking efforts as in our interreligious encounters we work with hope. We don’t expect to see the results of our activities in our own lifetime, although we are gratified when we are permitted glimpses that our work is not in vain. What was it that motivated the elderly Abraham to keep on believing when God told him that he would be the father of many nations? Until the birth of his sons, Abraham could only count on God’s word and hope that God would find a way to make those words a reality. In our interreligious relations in coming years, we work with the same hope that God will find a way to make our efforts fruitful for coming generations.
Conclusion: praying for one another

I will close my talk this evening with Abraham’s beautiful prayer in the Qur’an. At the same time, he expresses his own faith and asks God to pardon his idol-worshiping father. Is one of the paths awaiting us in interreligious dialogue that, like Abraham, we too should be representing in prayer before God the needs of our relatives, neighbors, and friends of other faiths?

“They are all an enemy to me, except the Lord of the worlds, who has created me and who guides me, who gives me food and drink. And when I am ill, it is He who heals me, Who will cause me to die and then give me life, and who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on the Day of Judgment. O my Lord, bestow wisdom on me and unite me to good people, Let me be remembered positively by later generations, And place me among those who will inherit the Garden, And forgive my father for being one of those who have gone astray” (Qur’an 26: 77-86).