

Healing memories and making history: The Abraham Conference 2019

Kim Chong, *Australasian Muslim Times*, 1 August 2019



Rev Dr Diego Sarrió-Cucarella

More than 120 delegates from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths attended the 2019 Abraham Conference held at Parramatta Mission Fellowship Hall on Sunday 28 July 2019 to “heal memories and make history”.

In a time when attacks on innocent worshippers in mosque, church and synagogue try to divide us, the followers of Abrahamic faiths came together to acknowledge our unique bond through our common ancestor, Prophet Abraham (a), while accounting for our differences through dialogue and friendship.



The event was co-hosted by Affinity Intercultural Foundation, The Australian Egyptian Forum Council, The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, and the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW & ACT.

Delegates explored the importance of interfaith relations around the central theme, “Healing Memories, Making History: Genuine Encounters in the Present will Redeem our Past for a Different Future”.



The theme was opened by a presentation from an international keynote speaker, Rev Dr Diego Sarrió-Cucarella, MAfr, Rector of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome.

His talk, “*The Abrahamic Religions: Shedding Past Polemics, Forging New Paradigms*”, provided a commentary and analysis of medieval Christian and Muslim polemical writings and how they negatively influence relations between members of the faiths today.



Mr John Cleary with Rev Dr Diego Sarrió-Cucarella.

Revisiting this history challenged the members of the three faiths to consider the painful legacy of their memories. If they shed seeing each other through the polemics of the past and encounter each other as they truly are in all their humanity today, they will open a path to healing.

Moreover, in healing their memories, they will be empowered to forge new relations founded in respect and mutuality and thereby make history.

Master of Ceremonies, John Cleary, former ABC broadcaster of *Compass* and *The Religion Report*, and a panel of Jewish, Christian and Muslim experts in the field of interfaith relations, expanded the presentation with comments and questions that addressed contemporary issues of concern among the panel and delegates.

Rabbi David Freedman and Judith Levitan highlighted from a Jewish perspective the godliness of all persons, made “in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26-7) as the basis for respect, and challenged the Christian and Muslim universalist ambition to allow a welcoming and hospitable space for others.



Professor Diane Speed and Dr Emmanuel Nathan from the Christian perspective affirmed the need for genuine respect of differences between religions without the extremes of either smothering the other by incorporating them within one’s own frame of reference, or othering them so radically as to make them alien. They noted also the gap within religions between populist rhetoric and scholarly leadership which must also be overcome.

Professor Ismail Albaytrak and Makiz Ansari, while acknowledging the polemic which marked our conflicted histories, also highlighted the long periods of living in harmony and peaceful co-existence, of *convivencia*, and the friendship and familiarity which also exists in our present times.



Group work among attendees, followed by a plenary, raised many questions, such as how the youth of today may lead in better interfaith relations, how the three faiths could provide a more public example of dialogue and friendship, and how might they better recognise difference and encourage diversity in society as a whole.

The Abraham Conference 2019 concluded that while such events are a move towards shedding polemics of the past to forge new paradigms in interfaith dialogue and friendship, there is still much work to be done in encouraging interfaith relations.

