

## Abraham Conference 2021: Women Leaders in the Abrahamic Traditions

Kim Chong. *Australasian Muslim Times*, 22 October 2021



The annual Abraham Conference was held on Sunday 10 October 2021 with the theme ‘Women Leaders in the Abrahamic Traditions: Role Models for Our Time,’ highlighting the contribution and difference women leaders in the Abrahamic traditions made in their time. The Conference, livestreamed on Zoom for the second year in a row due to COVID-19 restrictions, featured a speaker from each of the Abrahamic faiths:

Jacquie Seemann Charak, co-founder and committee member of Or Chadash, a Modern Orthodox Synagogue, and the Sydney’s Women’s Tefila Group;

Associate Professor Michele Connolly rsj, lecturer in Biblical Studies at the Catholic Institute of Sydney; and

Yamamah Agha, general manager of the Humanitarian Settlement Program at Settlement Services International.

Gunditjmara woman, Aunty Shirley Gilbert, opened the Conference with an Acknowledgement to Country. She shared her appreciation for the Aboriginal women who made their Aboriginal communities strong through their generosity and spiritual wisdom.

The MC, Jane Jeffes, producer and director of a range of documentaries, former executive producer of *The Religion and Ethics Report* on ABC Radio, and a mother of two daughters opened the discussion.

The context of this year’s theme was the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements and the revelations of abuse in our federal parliament early this year, all of which brought thousands of women onto the streets in protest. “[These movements] bring into question patriarchal attitudes. They demand a new 21st century respect for women and have shone a light on the objectification and the abuse of women, whether that’s sexual abuse and domestic abuse or simply the denial of their full participation in society at whatever level,” Ms Jeffes said.

“This is about women’s agency and what that can do for all society. This theme is particularly relevant now, where we have watched what has been happening in Afghanistan and the impact that will have on Afghan women and girls.”

Jacque Seemann Charak shared the millennia–old stories of two women from Jewish texts, Devorah and Beruriah.

Devorah was a prophetess and a judge of Israel, “a woman of valour, diligent in her ways and as quick as a fire torch”. Devorah’s leadership resulted in a sustained period of stability for the Jewish people.

The second is Talmudic sage Beruriah, who lived in Israel during the second century of the Christian era. She is one of the few women whose authority in law and ethics and spiritual leadership feature in the Talmud and on par with the male scholars.

Associate Professor Michele Connolly rsj spoke of two lay women and one group of women from the 21st century, who inspire her as they live their Catholic faith.

For Sr Connolly, these women are inventing new ways to keep their spirituality alive and lead women in their faith, without much support from the official structures of the Church. The women are Andrea Dean, Christina Gomez and the Wagga-based women’s group, Spirit Weavers.

Yamamah Agha spoke of the wife of Prophet Muhammed (s), Khadija (r), “the first woman of Islam”. A successful businesswoman, Khadija wielded great economic and political power and influence.

Impressed by Prophet Muhammed’s (s) character when he worked for her business, Khadija (r) proposed to him. During their marriage, when the Prophet told Khadija (r) about his divine revelations, she encouraged him to leave the business and preach full time.

Almost every year since 2002, the Abraham Conference has brought together Jews, Christians and Muslims by celebrating the common bonds of ancestry and faith that unite them in their various approaches to Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, who are foundational figures for each of the Abrahamic religions.

The Conference seeks to overcome ignorance and prejudice and promotes better mutual understanding and cooperation among them in pursuit of the common good.

This year’s Abraham Conference was again organised and hosted by the Coordinating Committee of representatives from Affinity Intercultural Foundation; the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations; the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies; the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW & ACT; Australasian Muslim Times AMUST; the Diocese of Parramatta; the NSW Ecumenical Council; the Australian Egyptian Forum Council; and the Indian Crescent Society of Australia.

*The 2021 Abraham Conference is available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?>*