

Solange De Santis

Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths, by Bruce Feiler
HarperCollins,

Talk about an unlikely vessel. Bruce Feiler, author of the current best-seller “Abraham” and last year’s “Walking the Bible,” freely admits he once couldn’t have imagined himself writing, thinking and talking about God. “Ten years ago, I was a clown,” he said in an interview shortly before a speech in early December at the University of Toronto. Mr. Feiler, 38, wasn’t speaking metaphorically. One of his six books, “Under the Big Top,” is the story of a year spent with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. Seven years ago, he was living in Nashville and hanging out with Garth Brooks, an experience that became another book, “Dreaming Out Loud.”

Now, he’s been bit bad by God. “Walking the Bible” was an account of Mr. Feiler’s attempt to engage the Book he left behind in his twenties, when Judaism had faded from his life. Feeling he needed a real, physical sense of the Bible, he toured the Middle East with noted biblical archaeologist Avner Goren, visiting sites associated with key events in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Readers responded to Mr. Feiler’s good humour, passionate sense of discovery (which occasionally bordered upon the naïve) and talent for description and narrative. For many, the most striking aspect of the book was that Mr. Feiler was on a personal quest: Did these old stories really happen? What relevance could they possibly have to a modern life? How can I relate to God? Do I even need to? By the end of the book, he hasn’t fallen to his knees on the road to Damascus, but concludes that striving to know God is as important a goal as arriving at some emphatically certain concept of the divine.

Taking issue with religious attitudes of “complete conviction,” in his words, is a major theme of “Abraham.” Subtitled “A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths,” the book views the great patriarch through the lenses of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – and the author is shocked at what he finds. The story in Genesis predates the establishment of all three religions and God’s call to Abraham, which includes the words “all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by you,” seems clearly to indicate a call to all humanity to live in partnership with the Creator. But in subsequent centuries, Mr. Feiler learns, each religion for various reasons claims Abraham as its own and views competing claims as fighting words.

To what extreme the fight is taken was made clear on Sept. 11, 2001, when Mr. Feiler watched from a New York apartment as the World Trade Center collapsed. He was working on a sequel to “Walking the Bible” and put it aside to consider one of the huge questions raised by September 11 – can the three religions get along? Within a couple of weeks, the question led back to the father of the three faiths and Mr. Feiler wondered if he could also be a figure of reconciliation. “So I read 50 books in 90 days and went and traveled,” he said.

Mr. Feiler consulted a number of scholars, including some in dangerous parts of the Middle East, and wrote the book within the year. Exasperated with institutional parochialism, he takes all three religions to task but falls in love with Abraham and comes to believe “we can ... leave behind our comfortable, even doctrinaire traditions and set out for an unknown location ... whose mandate is to be a place where God’s blessing is promised to all.” He does not propose abandoning religion but moving into a space of respect and communication, a space now inhabited by more and more scholars and ordinary people of faith.

To that end, a project conceived by Mr. Feiler and his publisher to get people talking and promote sales of the book – urge the organization of interfaith conversations

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focused on the figure of Abraham – has been embraced by readers across North America. There have been more than 2,500 downloads of the organizational material on Mr. Feiler's Web site (www.brucefeiler.com) and he's been kept busy with speaking engagements and appearances. "People are hungering for hope," he said.

So what of his own faith? Does he now attend shul more regularly? Not necessarily, although he writes movingly of his family's religious history in Savannah, Ga. "I still wrestle with organized religion," he said, but engaging the great questions of spirituality has made his life "better, richer, more joyful," even though, he admitted, "I'm an unlikely messenger."

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