

[REFLECTIONS BY ABDAL HAKIM MURAD, COMMON WORD DELEGATE,
FOLLOWING THE MEETING ON 4-5 MARCH 2008, AT THE PONTIFICAL
COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE]

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

May I express, first of all, my appreciation to the Pontifical Council for its recognition of the importance of the *Common Word* document, and to Cardinal Tauran for his kind and heartfelt words of welcome. In particular I was pleased to note his allusion to *Nostra Aetate*, one of the most significant inter-religious documents of our time, which opened a new era of mutual respect and affirmation between Muslims and Catholic Christians.

I have always been delighted by the capacity of the Catholic Church to produce individuals committed to the principle of respectful fellowship with Muslims. In particular, one cannot fail to note the figure of Louis Massignon, the French priest who, entirely in opposition to the dominant colonial spirit of his time and place, deployed his scholarly and spiritual gifts to produce his brilliant work in which he demonstrates the Koranic origins and inspiration of Muslim spirituality. Massignon's experience of authentic Muslim hospitality persuaded him of Islam's quality as an Abrahamic religion, manifesting the grace of the host; and his life as a priest and a scholar was dedicated to exploring and proclaiming the reassuring reality which brings us together today: the fact that we gather under the shared tent of Abraham, with all that that implies. Other pioneers of the same kind spring readily to mind. And the work of PISAI has certainly been at the forefront of the Catholic campaign to promote a more accurate and respectful view of Islamic culture and thought not only among the Catholic faithful, but in the world at large. In a time when many Muslims feel threatened by Western cultural, economic and even military encroachment, such voices are now urgently needed to assuage Muslim fears.

In our world of mass communications, those who seek to reach out to engage meaningfully with members of other faiths bear a particularly heavy responsibility. Ours is a wounded world. Its tragedies are those of an unbridled individualism and materialism, manifested in the decay of family values and in the love of neighbour. Humanity, say our scriptures, suffers when denied the love of the One God, and the love of neighbour. We are, as religions, facing a common threat and challenge in a way that may be historically unique, and we must see this as an opportunity, under Heaven, for real cooperation. We are accountable to God for the sincerity with which we seize this opportunity.

Ours is a world wounded also by misapprehensions about religion. Research suggests that a leading factor for the decay of faith in God is now not problems of the existence of God, or the nature and source of evil, but rather the widespread sense that religion brings discord rather than healing to the world. The reality of engagement between believers of different traditions is overwhelmingly one of conviviality; but extremists on all sides veil this by using language of exclusion and contempt. The Vatican has

worked to overcome the negative perceptions caused by some in the West who use religious language to veil political or cultural hatreds, but this is not always noted in the Muslim world. On the Muslim side, the dozens of international conferences of religious leaders who condemn terrorism and unjust war are likewise underreported by the media. In consequence, too many in our world are unaware of the quieter, but immensely hopeful story, of real theological, personal and spiritual respect which exists between members of the Abrahamic faiths.

As we came together to explore ways of building on this document to promote peace and healing in the world, we recognized that we represent our constituencies in different ways. Authority is expressed in our traditions differently. Our particular group, comprising signatories of the *Common Word*, is drawn from all major Muslim regions and schools of thought. However it comes together explicitly in the terms of the *Common Word* document. Issues not raised by that document may not be matters of agreement between us, and in our initiatives we can only promote those large theological and ethical principles which the *Word* commends. On matters of details the members of our delegation can only speak for themselves, and for their own specific traditions.

It has not escaped the attention of the Pontifical Council, likewise, that our document is addressed to all branches of the Christian family. We have been heartened by the warmth of the speedy response from very many Christian church leaders and thinkers from the Reformed tradition, and we have agreed to meet their representatives for a significant theological engagement in Yale this July. The response from the Anglican Church has been warm and heartfelt, and we look forward also to our forthcoming meeting with Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, and other Anglican theologians later this year in Cambridge. We are also grateful for the energy with which Georgetown University has set in train arrangements for our meeting there in January of 2009. Likewise, the particular demographics of many Middle Eastern countries ensures that relations with the Orthodox Churches will be vital to our concerns, and initial reactions from Moscow and Istanbul have already demonstrated the importance of the *Common Word* initiative in those important centres of Christian ecclesial life.

Finally, on behalf of the Muslim delegates, may I reiterate my appreciation for the Holy See's warm sense of the importance of the *Common Word* initiative, and for the generosity and frankness of the opening remarks by Cardinal Tauran, and the subsequent rich discussions, which have led, by the favour of God, to the joint decision to proceed with a first seminar of the Christian-Muslim Forum.

'And success is from God'.

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