

Thought for the Day - Abdal Hakim Murad - 12/03/2013

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Good morning.

As the cardinals file into the Sistine Chapel this morning, and the great doors are closed behind them, they ponder a decision of excruciating complexity.

Should the new Pope hail from the Church's traditional European heartland, or from the growing congregations of the developing world? Should he be an academic, or a charismatic global symbol? A reformer? A traditionalist? How will his background shape his priorities as Pope?

Some might wonder why this should interest non-Christians like myself. The Muslim world has its own problems – why intrude in an internal Catholic affair?

The answer is that in a strange way, which is perhaps unprecedented in history, the fates of the religions are intertwined.

Secular alternatives to faith gain ground when religion gets a bad press, and lose traction when religion is at its best. From the outside, religion is increasingly seen a single phenomenon, which surely means that believers have an interest in seeing other believers flourish. And the world is a safer place for everyone, regardless of their religion, if there is understanding between the different faiths.

So if I am a Muslim concerned about the health of religion in general, what do I see as the priorities for the new Pope?

Finding a prophetic voice that can speak to the West and the developing world will, surely, form one of his key tasks. He will have to speak to a global community, not to one part of it. And I suspect that there is one, rather urgent matter, where much common ground might be found.

This is the question of money. Ours is a time of global economic restructuring, which often exacerbates the gap between rich and poor.

This isn't a new problem, as any scripture will tell you.

There was a time when Muslims, Christians and others felt nervous about preaching loudly against income disparities, for fear of being labelled fifth columnists for Marxism. With the collapse of the Iron Curtain, that accusation does not stick so easily.

Let's remember the shocking facts. The poorest 40% of the world's population owns only 1% of the planet's wealth. But 40% of the world's wealth is owned by the richest one percent of the world's population.

This might sound like a grievance of primary concern to believers from the developing world. But it hits us too. Over the last forty years, the wealthiest one percent of the British population doubled its percentage share of the nation's wealth. It's our problem as well.

You don't need to be a Latin American liberation theologian to be horrified by this. In fact, some very conservative cardinals have spoken out against the new idolatry of the market. Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha and others, lived among the poor, sharing their burden. 'Woe betide the hoarders,' is a koranic warning, but it is not only koranic.

As a Muslim, I find myself praying for a Pope who can unite the world's conscience on this pressing and shameful issue of our time.