

# The Pact



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The Spiritual Friendship between  
Chiara Lubich and Imam W. D. Mohammed

Roberto Catalano

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# Foreword

By Imam Mikal Saahir

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Regardless of the many challenges humanity faces, the twenty-first century, due to better and faster means of communication and much-improved means of travel, continues to witness the unifying—or some may argue, the reunifying—of the human family. A unity that is blossoming not only in secluded or isolated religious, cultural, and ethnic sectors, but more importantly these myriad communities are intersecting and coalescing around their common goodness while simultaneously highlighting and celebrating the uniqueness of the other. This coming together of humankind is possible because, more and more, humanity is properly identifying with the disciplines of mutual respect, a respect that is often accompanied by a beaming love for G\_d.

Roberto Catalano has witnessed firsthand the birth and evolution of a religious-cultural-ethnic encounter of what seemed—at least on the surface—an “unlikely pair” of two leaders: one leader Christian and the other Islamic. Beginning with their respective histories, Roberto captures in print that which has captured the hearts and minds of millions of people who love and respect these two world leaders: Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement, and Imam W. Deen Mohammed, who led the Muslim American community for thirty-three years. In 1997 these two leaders, exemplifying powerful faith in G\_d and goodness, formed a pact, a spiritual friendship that has surpassed their earthly journey. Both Chiara and Imam Mohammed passed in 2008, in March and October, respectively.

Catalano's *The Pact* illustrates the historical evolution of the societies that produced a Chiara Lubich in Italy and a W. Deen Mohammed in the United States of America. Chiara and W. Deen were both born in challenging circumstances that, through the mercy of G\_d, brought out the best in them. Within their respective life experiences each leader searched for that



which they believed G\_d wanted them to see, understand, and pursue.

W. Deen's father, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, had taken a Black nationalistic approach to solving the American Blacks' problems. Albeit called "Islam," Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam message in many ways went against the grain of the Qur'an; however, this dichotomy challenged W. Deen's mind to work his way out of his father's Black Nationalist presentation of religion, a necessary journey that led him to embrace the universal teachings of Al-Islam, proper. Imam Mohammed's Nation of Islam experience as clarified by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (of Arabia) produced a new world leadership for humanity.

Chiara, too, blossomed from challenging surroundings. World War II came directly to her neighborhood, bringing despair and devastation; ironically, this difficult environment provided a unique opportunity to shield her life with scripture, prayer, and action. She and her close companions rose up to face the task presented before them. The phrase *Omnia vincit amor*, "love conquers all," was birthed out of her anguish. Through the trials of World War II G\_d imbued Chiara with special insightful lessons

that carried her life and mission forward and bestowed upon her a vision and leadership that today has reached the world.

The Qur'an reminds humanity, "We made you tribes and nations so that you would get acquainted with and recognize each other." This "spiritual friendship" formed by Chiara and Imam W. Deen is a true expression of this Qur'anic verse, which encourages people from diverse backgrounds to "get acquainted with and recognize each other" (Quran 49:13). This mutual recognizing of the other gives a firm foundation, as Catalano points out, for sincere unity and an answer to Christ Jesus' prayer, "May they all be one" (John 17:21).

A "spiritual friendship" is where souls connect; the original soul as created by G\_d and undefiled by worldly concerns. Catalano shows how such a relationship, a spiritual friendship, transcends race, gender, culture, or national origin, thus becoming a stabilizing anchor and a beacon of light that, along with uniting two communities, also serves as a model of natural unity for our human family.

Catalano shares with the reader how Imam W. Deen's and Lady Chiara's spiritual friendship continues to build tangible results and relation-

ships that disassemble the many unnatural man-made barriers that hinder human progress. While recognizing that early on some viewed such a spiritual friendship as “risky,” Catalano demonstrates how the two visionary leaders understood that our diversity is our strength. Imam W. Deen, speaking in Harlem at the famous Malcolm Shabazz Mosque in May of 1997, shared, “and G\_d has made things different, and human beings too, different, because he wants that unity to progress. The diversity is to provide the unity with legs, with wheels, with movement, so that we can have more movement and more progress.” Lady Chiara’s statement resonates with W. Deen’s words. Speaking in Washington, DC, in November of 2000, she shared, “I am sure that Allah was pleased, seeing so many of his children, although different in origin, nation, religion, so united in him. And who knows what blessings he has in store for all of us who have become brothers and sisters!”

Myself, a longtime student of Imam W. Deen Mohammed and a more recent new student of Lady Chiara Lubich, I have traveled to many cities in America as well as numerous cities in Italy, the Philippines, and Jordan, receiving and processing myriad messages and examples

of universal brotherhood. I'm grateful for the blessed opportunity to be a firsthand witness to the formation and fruition of a miracle of G\_d's love for the human family in that He permitted a twenty-first-century model of the unity of mankind to manifest itself for all to see.

World leaders from Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and other faith traditions have recognized the spiritual friendship that has been established between Imam Mohammed and Chiara Lubich, a friendship that continues to serve as a testimony of tomorrow's hope.

The work begun by Chiara Lubich and Imam W. Deen Mohammed, in shaa Allah (G\_d willing), is not near completion. In fact, we believe that it is just beginning. Roberto Catalano has captured an important moment that comes along rarely within our histories. It is a demonstration of faith in positive outgrowths from a newfound unity that many new spiritual friends believe has an outstanding future not only for the individuals and communities highlighted in his *The Pact*, but also an outstanding future for all of humanity.

# A Spiritual Friendship

By Roberto Catalano

**I**n March 2014, on the occasion of a conference in memory of Chiara Lubich, held at the Aula Magna of the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome, Imam Ronald Shaheed of Milwaukee concluded his speech by underlining the originality of the experience of interreligious dialogue born from the relationship between Chiara Lubich and the Focolare Movement she founded, and Imam Warith Deen Mohammed with the community of Muslims who support his ministry. “[It can] represent a model for the whole world,” he said. “I believe that God and only God could have made it possible.”<sup>1</sup> A few weeks later, African American Muslim judge David A. Shaheed of Indianapolis<sup>2</sup> returned to the same subject and, referring to the experience of dialogue between the Focolare and African American Muslims, spoke of an

extraordinary collaboration with a unique spiritual dimension.

[It goes] against any common logic that the son of the leader [of the Nation of Islam] would begin a close collaboration with a woman, leader of a charismatic movement of the Catholic Church, taking courageous positions on forgiveness and the unity of the human family.<sup>3</sup>

The Imam and the Catholic woman seem to have had nothing in common but sincere leadership of millions of people. Yet they have given rise to an original experience of interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims that continues to develop several years after their deaths. In order to appreciate the novelty of the experience of their spiritual friendship it is necessary to mention, at least in summary, the context in which the human family of Imam W. D. Mohammed developed.<sup>4</sup>

## **Islam in North America**

The presence of Islam in the USA dates back to the colonial period and that of slavery.<sup>5</sup> “Estimates vary, but they [the Muslims] were at least 900,000 out of the 12.5 million Africans

taken to the Americas. Among the 400,000 Africans who spent their lives enslaved in the United States, tens of thousands were Muslims.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars estimate that as many as 30% of the African slaves (enslaved) brought to the U.S., from West and Central African Countries like Gambia and Cameroon, were Muslim. Among the difficulties they faced, were also those related to their faith.<sup>7</sup> An article by Dora Mekouar, “America’s First Muslims Were Slaves,” refers to Omar Ibn Said, a 37-year-old wealthy scholar from Senegal, who was captured and sold into slavery. “When people thought of a Muslim at that time, they thought Arab, they thought Ottoman, they thought Middle Eastern,” Kayle Beydoun, an author and law professor at the University of Arkansas, says. “Enslaved Africans did not fit within that racial ethnic caricature or form.” This narrow understanding of both Muslims and Africans led to the widespread belief that the two identities could not overlap and helped the erasure of Muslims African enslaved from the historical record.<sup>8</sup> This Islamic presence, although it did not survive, has made its contribution to the history and culture of the continent, without, however, a continuity of conscious practice.<sup>9</sup>

After a first immigration from Arab countries around 1875,<sup>10</sup> another important moment for the Muslim presence in the USA was the approval by Congress of the National Origin Act, which, starting in 1924, allowed immigration from Asia and from Muslim-majority countries, favoring the arrival of thousands of faithful of Islam. Shortly before, the movement of African Americans toward Islam had begun,<sup>11</sup> characterized by two processes. The first began between 1914 and 1920, when in New York the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was born, founded by Marcus Garvey. In 1920 the organization already had one hundred thousand members divided into different sections in the world. By connecting the entire black world with Africa and its members with each other, Garvey helped Black Americans acquire an awareness of their African origins. This, for the first time, produced a feeling of solidarity between Africans and those who descended from them. Garvey coined an affectionate slogan, “One God, One Aim, One Destiny,” promoting the idea of Islam as a religion of the African tradition capable of connecting non-whites against colonialism and racial oppression. (It should be mentioned that



not Garvey alone but also, for example, Noble Drew Ali and the Moorish Science Temple influenced the Nation of Islam.)<sup>12</sup>

A second process at the origin of the movement of African Americans toward Islam is that of the great migratory flows from the poor South to the large industrial areas of the North.<sup>13</sup>

### **African American Muslims, Elijah Muhammad, and the Nation of Islam**

In fact, Elijah Muhammad, father of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, was among the protagonists of the great internal migration to the industrial centers of the North (Detroit, Chicago, and New York, particularly Harlem).<sup>14</sup> In 1931, he met Fard Muhammad,<sup>15</sup> which represented a turning point for his life and for the future of millions of African Americans. Fard, in fact, in addition to professing the Islamic faith, believed in the superiority of Black people, a concept which does not have any Qur'anic foundation. However, the impact of his ideas on young Elijah was such that in a short time the young man became Fard's most loyal follower and the most prominent member within a community called Temples of Islam, which in later times would be renamed The Lost-Found

Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of North America or, simply, the Nation of Islam.<sup>16</sup> Fard became not only a savior, but a “prophet,” and over time he came to be considered a “god.” His teachings were “supreme wisdom” to be studied and accepted without any objection.<sup>17</sup>

Elijah, after the mysterious disappearance of Fard, would remain the undisputed leader of the movement until his death in 1975. Elijah’s message “was designed to meet all the needs of African-Americans,”<sup>18</sup> offering an alternative identity and a proposal to improve racial and social conditions,<sup>19</sup> based on the idea that “the white man is the devil.”<sup>20</sup> From a religious point of view, however, the Nation of Islam did not possess an orthodox doctrine according to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Some of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad would not be accepted by the Muslims of the East, and the Muslim leader himself was aware of this and did not hide it.<sup>21</sup>

### **Imam Warith Deen Mohammed**

It is in this context that the figure of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed (born Wallace D. Muhammad), seventh child of Elijah Muhammad, is placed. It was he who succeeded his father at



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